

SEPTEMBER

10-STORY ALL DIFFERENT! DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

10¢



CRIME IN THE WACKS' MUSEUM

By
NORMAN A. DANIELS

MURDER HIRES A PRESS AGENT

By ROBERT TURNER

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10-STORY DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE

ALL STAR
ALL DIFFERENT

Vol. VII

September, 1942

No. 3

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Cover by Norm Saunders

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Murder Hires a Press Agent

Intriguing Novelette

By Robert Turner



*Outlined in the moonlight, his shovel
had unearthed a man's body.*

CHAPTER I

DEATH'S PRESS AGENT

THE room was black as a well bottom. I sat up in bed, swaying at the waist, staring blankly into the darkness, scratching the skin off my left arm. My head felt like a fat pumpkin atop a stick. My tongue was feathery. I tried to think what I had eaten before going to bed to make me feel like this.

Vague details of a nightmare rolled into my consciousness and I shuddered, licked parched lips. Just as though it had really happened I could see those three thugs holding guns at

my head, forcing me to make some crazy phone call against my will. It was all kind of hazy but I was just as glad. Just remembering that much had sweat rolling off my top lip.

I rolled out of bed, staggered sleepily to the bathroom, still scratching my arm. I took a couple of aspirins, gagging, then rolled up my sleeve, examined the itching arm. In the center of a silver-dollar sized spot, raw-meat red, was a tiny puncture in the skin. It was all welted up.

I wondered how in blazes a mosquito had got into my twelfth floor bachelor apartment in March. I looked into the mirror, at brick-red hair tousled untidily, a moldy green complexion. You could have carried small coins in the bags under my eyes.

Something was definitely haywire. I'd always prided myself on keeping fit and in the pink, in spite of being in the late thirties. No heavy boozing, lots of exercise, plenty of sleep. Why, I'd retired the night before at ten-thirty, and here I was looking like a binge-busy playboy; waking up with nightmares. I shook my head.

Maybe I was sick. Maybe that was the beginning of a rash on my arm. Abruptly I wheeled back to the mirror, bent close to the glass, fingered a blue-tinged lump at my temple. I had noticed it before, but only subconsciously. I winced at the touch and pain streaked down that whole side of my face.

THIS was too much. I stumbled back into the bedroom, picked up the bedside phone, dialed Dr. Walters' number. He'd know what the symptoms were. A little prescription, maybe, and I'd be all right. I twisted uneasily, impatient that it was taking him so long to answer.

It hit me all of a sudden that there was no ringing sound from the phone. I would have noticed it right away if I hadn't been so groggy. There wasn't even dial tone. I jiggled the receiver. Then I saw the wires hanging loose

from the instrument. They had been cut.

Things came fast after that. I saw the bedside electric clock, noticed for the first time that it said five minutes past ten. That was impossible! I'd gone to bed at ten-thirty, had been asleep for hours. I picked up the clock, stared at it with a sickly expression. The second hand was revolving slowly. It hadn't stopped.

Maybe it was morning, a very dull day. I flicked a panicky glance at the window. The shades were half up and it was pitch dark.

But it *couldn't* be that early in the evening. I suddenly felt smothered, stifled by the very walls of the room. I had to get out, see other people. In the flat downstairs a radio crashed out swinging music.

I showered and dressed in a hurry, calming myself: "Take it easy, chum. You're Lester Lane, newspaper publisher. You're home in your own little dump. You woke up in the middle of the night with a sick stomach and just because the clock's gone screwy—"

It didn't work. There was that lump on my head, the itching thing on my arm, the phone being cut. I started to turn out the bedroom light, leave, when I noticed something else. One of the shades was blowing, rattling in a draft. Yet the window was closed.

A fire escape ran past this room and just to be on the safe side I never opened these windows. I ran over, yanked up the shade, saw the splintered glass on the sill and the neat little spot where the pane had been cut right over the latch. The latch was open. It had been closed when I retired.

Out on the street a restaurant window clock said ten-thirty. Chills shook me all over. That confirmed that my own clock had been right. I grabbed the *Oceanville Times*—my paper—off a cigar store newsstand, glanced at the date-line, stomach churning. I must have slept for nearly twenty-four hours. The date was March 21st.

It had been the twentieth when I went to bed.

I slammed inside, entered a phone booth and called the office. I got McDonald, the night editor, said: "Hello, Mac!" It didn't even sound like my voice. "This is Lester Lane. I—uh—I—"

MCDONALD cut off my stammering. "Good crapes, chief!" Where you been? All day long they've been trying to get you, on the phone—telegrams. Phone company said your line was on the fluke and there was no one home so they couldn't get in to fix it. I've been going mad trying to explain that damned crazy ad. I—"

"What ad, Mac?"

"That full pager in the center section. You stirred up more excitement than an air raid. I don't mind telling you, chief, that if I'd had any idea you weren't going to be around today to back me up, I'd have refused you flatly last night, job or no job. Baby, I never want another day like this. What was the idea, anyhow?"

"Wait a minute, Mac," I said. "Just—just hold on."

I leaned against the wall of the booth dizzily. It was coming back now, that nightmare, like a motion picture reeling in reverse, in fast motion. I fumbled open the *Times* I had bought outside. It was right there in the center section, a full page advertisement. Out of all that white space the brief copy in big black letters leaped at me:

NOTICE!

If I am found dead tomorrow, no matter what form in which the end might come, it will be murder! The killer will be my business partner, Martin Kelrose. Investigation will prove this.

(signed) THOMAS MALLOY.

I read it over and over, but it wasn't my eyes. The words stayed right there. In parenthesis at the bottom was the notation: *This is a paid advertisement.*

It hadn't been a nightmare. It really happened. Now the effect of the drug and the wallop on the head left

completely and I remembered. Three thugs had broken into my flat while I was asleep, awakened me, gunned me into phoning that ad in to my paper. Then they'd whacked me on the head.

I remembered struggling, seeing the flash of a hypo needle as one of the lugs pulled it from his pocket. After kayoing me they'd administered a shot of sleeping juice, put me back to bed, cut the phone wires and lammed.

Somehow I got the receiver to my ear again, spoke to McDonald. "Mac," I half screamed, "you damned crazy baboon, why did you print that thing? Didn't you *know* something must be wrong, that I was being forced to make that call?"

"Forced?" he repeated dazedly. "Damn, chief, if I didn't think of everything but that. I figured maybe you were cockeyed drunk or maybe it was someone imitating you, fooling around. But you soon convinced me. You cussed me out. I never heard you sound more serious in your life. I tried to argue you out of it, learn what it was all about but you just gave me hell, threatened to fire me, blacklist me with every publisher in the country if I didn't obey. What was I going to do?"

THOSE thugs had warned me that if I didn't put it over good, they'd kill me, then go out and bump Doreen too. Doreen is my fiancée. I could see they weren't fooling, so I gave to poor Mac. I figured all I'd have to do would be call him back as soon as they left. There'd be plenty of time. But they outfoxed me on that.

"All right, Mac," I said, "all right. I—I'll be down in a little while. Hold tight." Then I thought of something. I shouted: "Hey, wait a minute, Mac! That ad—it didn't—didn't come true? I—I mean Kelrose didn't—"

"No, no!" he stopped me. "Nothing like that. Hell, that's all we'd need. I hadn't even thought about that!"

I hung up, rushed out and down the street to the garage, got out my

coupé, headed for Martin Kelrose's home. There was going to be hell to pay for this. Kelrose and Malloy are the town big-shots. They own the million dollar Oceanville Paper Plant. They run the whole burg between them, could run me and my little rag out in less than a few minutes, if they wanted to bear down. Just to set things off Martin Kelrose was slated to be my father-in-law. He's Doreen's dad.

And there was my paper running a notice, signed by Malloy, that Kelrose was going to murder him. I rolled down the window for air. I was getting nauseous.

It was too much to even try to figure out what was behind it all, who those thugs were, why they wanted such a strange thing.

I turned into the pine-lined driveway of Seaside, a shore estate that takes up half the Jersey coast, with its own private beach and acres of garden and pine woods.

DOREEN, herself, answered my knock at the front door. When I had last seen her she was pretty and fresh as a spring rose. Now her face was drawn as if she had bathed with alum. Her large gray eyes were stark with unshed tears. She came into my arms.

"Les!" she cried. "What does it all mean—that horrible advertisement in the paper—dad disappearing?"

I told her all that I knew about the weird business. Then I said: "But what's that about your dad disappearing, Doreen?"

She covered her face with her hands. Her voice was so weak I had to strain to hear: "Nobody's seen him since ten o'clock this morning. He's gone, vanished completely. He'd been acting awfully strange lately, Les, as though he were losing his mind, maybe. He hasn't slept nights. I — I've heard him pacing his room. This morning he didn't even go down to the factory.

"He sent for his secretary, Claire

Vaughn, to come take dictation at the house. When they were through they left the house together. I was watching them out the window. Claire got into her car and left the estate. Dad walked out into the garden. That—that was the last time I saw him."

"Have you searched the grounds? Maybe he had an—an accident, or—"

"The servants have gone over the whole place. We even went down onto the beach and out to the old abandoned lighthouse. Les, this isn't like dad. Something's deathly wrong. Those thugs must have had a reason for making you run that ad. Suppose—suppose Malloy is killed?"

I started to lead her up the hall toward the stairs. I tried to speak calmly, reasonably. "He'll show up again, Doreen. There must be some logical explanation for this whole ridiculous thing."

Somehow my words didn't ring true. But Doreen caught hold. She said: "Thanks, Les." Her eyes shone up at me. "It—I'll be all right, now."

"Look, honey, about Malloy, how did he react to that advertisement? Did he call here or anything?"

"You know the *Times* doesn't come out until eleven A. M. Well, it wasn't until I saw that, that I thought anything about the fact that dad hadn't returned to the house. Several more hours went by and I became worried. I called the paper factory and he hadn't been down to the office.

"Then I asked to speak to Mr. Malloy, thinking maybe he might have some idea where I could find dad, that maybe he had an appointment somewhere, and Malloy would know. But Malloy wasn't in his office, hadn't come in today at all. I've called at his home several times, haven't been able to get an answer."

Just then the front doorbell clanged. We stood stiff and still for several seconds, then Doreen broke from me, ran and flung the door wide. Standing there, twisting his hat in his hand, his bald head shining in the hall light, was Mike Muldoon, Ocean-

ville's chief of police. Behind him were two uniformed cops.

"We'd like to see Mr. Kelrose, please," Muldoon said heavily.

Doreen opened her mouth but no words came out. She clutched at her throat. I stepped in. "So would we," I said, and informed him that no one had seen Mr. Kelrose all day.

Muldoon vigorously rubbed the shiny peak of his hat. "That's bad," he said. "We've been trying to get in touch with Malloy all day to question him about that ad. Tonight, on a hunch, we went out to his place, broke in and found him lying in his study with a knife in his back!"

CHAPTER II

UNEXPECTED VISITOR

I HAD plenty of trouble with Doreen. She snapped like a taut piano wire. With Muldoon's help I got her upstairs to her own room. When I had shoed out the law again I talked to her, got some whisky down her throat, and finally she gave out and her hysteria subsided to low, steady sobbing.

Martin Kelrose couldn't possibly have killed his partner, Malloy, I explained to her soothingly. Her father, I told Doreen, was a fine, upstanding man. It wouldn't make sense. Malloy was inclined to be a narrow, miserly old guy. It was just probably coincidence that some one of his enemies caught up with him at this time, I told her.

That helped and soon she stopped sobbing, stretched out on the bed. I waited until I was pretty sure she had dozed into exhausted slumber and rejoined Muldoon and his men downstairs.

I got into my coupé and followed their car away from Seaside, several miles down the shore road to the home of Thomas Malloy. There was some difference in the partners' residences. Malloy lived in a weather-beaten old frame house, that hadn't been paint-

ed in decades. The small grounds were badly neglected.

We skinned between several parked police cars, stopped right behind the department meat wagon. They were taking Thomas Malloy out in a wicker basket for his last ride as we entered.

"The crime itself was very simply executed," Muldoon explained. "Malloy lives here all alone. He was sitting in his study on the ground floor, reading. The murderer sneaked in the window, behind him, plunged an ordinary kitchen peeling knife into his back and left. It must have been done early this morning. That's why no one had been able to get in touch with the old guy all day."

We walked through uncarpeted halls to the small study at the rear of the house. Print and camera men were finishing up and the M. E. was packing his bag. There was blood on an old Morris chair, backed to a window, red stains leading from it to a telephone table a few yards away. In front of the table there were wider crimson smears and the shape of the corpse outlined with white chalk on the floor. Malloy had lived a few seconds, tried to reach the phone, didn't quite make it.

Muldoon's entire detective bureau, a man named Conboy, was there. He was holding a letter in one hand. He turned to Muldoon as we entered. He flicked his derby to the back of his head and spoke around a stub of mangled cigar.

"Well, chief, while you were gone, I cleaned up the whole thing. Kelrose is the murderer all right. He's been stealing company funds for weeks, juggling the books. Malloy got suspicious and made an investigation. He'd got the goods on Kelrose and was going to expose him tomorrow morning."

"So Kelrose bumped him before he had the chance, eh?" Muldoon finished. "Sounds plausible, Conboy. Where'd you get the dope?"

"From Douglas Lederer, here." He jerked his head at the young man

standing next to him. "He was Malloy's secretary down at the paper factory." Conboy handed Muldoon the typewritten letter he held.

A QUICK glance over the chief's shoulder showed that the letter was on Oceanville Paper Company letterhead, addressed to the county attorney. It was a brief statement that Martin Kelrose had been embezzling company funds and a demand for his immediate arrest and investigation. It was signed by Thomas Malloy.

While Muldoon read, I studied Lederer. He was tall and heavy-set, on the Clark Gable style, even to the dimples. He had grown a mustache to further the resemblance, but it hadn't come out so good. It was scraggly. His eyes were muddy brown, almost yellow.

He said: "On top of that advertisement, this'll make quite a yarn for your paper, won't it, Mr. Lane?"

Muldoon pivoted toward me then, forgetting the letter for the moment. He stabbed his forefinger at me as though it were a fencing foil.

"I'm glad that was brought up," he barked, and gathered himself up for the verbal pounce. His eyes narrowed. "You're in on this somewhere, Lane. What about that ad? Why didn't you let us know Malloy was worried about being killed? Why did you skip out so we couldn't question you when the ad appeared? Why—"

"Hold it," I stopped him. "Malloy didn't order that ad."

He stared at me, incredulous. "Who, then?"

"I did," I said quietly and when he was through gaffing like a grounded fish I told him all about the thugs and all that had happened. When I was finished, he exploded.

"Utterly fantastic. You're trying to cover up Kelrose because you and his daughter are engaged."

I pulled up my sleeve, displayed the still irritated puncture from the hypodermic. I showed the still slight swelling at my temple.

"And so," I told him, "there goes your nice, neat little theory. Malloy most certainly wouldn't insert an ad in my paper in that manner. Most assuredly Kelrose didn't hire those thugs to pre-announce a crime."

There was no argument on those points so I went on: "Back at Kelrose's place I saw some of your men questioning the servants, Muldoon. Did they find out whether there were any signs of Kelrose skipping out? Were any of his clothes missing? Either of his cars gone?"

"No, we checked on all that. Listen, where the hell do you come off, cross-questioning *me*?" The chief bridled. "What right—"

"None," I stated quietly, "except that Kelrose is the father of the girl I'm going to marry. Even if he is guilty of embezzling and has skipped out, that doesn't mean he killed his partner. And don't forget, my paper was used in this mad mess. What the hell's it going to look like, my rag carrying a notice of a murder before it happens?"

I was really going now. I wheeled on Lederer. "Where did you get that letter of Malloy's about Kelrose embezzling? What do *you* know about it?"

LEDERER'S eyes got very muddy and yellow for a moment and then his dimples broke into a smile. "As Mr. Malloy's confidential secretary," he said smoothly, "I was assigned by him, secretly, to go over the books. Acting on the evidence I found, he wrote that letter to the authorities, gave it to me, to mail."

"How come you still have it? Why didn't you post it?"

He shrugged. "I put it in my pocket and forgot about it."

I turned back to Muldoon. "Have you interviewed Claire Vaughn, Kelrose's secretary, yet?"

"What's she got to do with this?" Lederer piped in.

"As far as we know she was the last person to see Kelrose, this morn-

ing. Maybe he said something to her, might have given some hint that would solve the mystery of his vanishing like this. Maybe there's a logical explanation."

"Mmmm," Muldoon mused. "She might be a help. Meanwhile I'll put out a six-state alarm to have him picked up."

"How about taking a run out to the match factory with me, Muldoon?" I suggested.

He frowned. "Why? Far as I'm concerned, Kelrose is still it, despite your screwy story. All I'm gonna do is sit back and wait for him to be picked up, and then unless he's got an airtight alibi, which he won't have—"

"Listen," I interrupted, "maybe you'll find some clue as to where he's hiding, in his office."

That was an idea to Muldoon. He liked it so much he even rode with me in my car over to the Oceanville Paper Company. There was nobody around, this time of night, except the watchman. We got a master key from him and entered one of the great, darkened factory buildings.

On the third floor we let ourselves into an acre of stenographers' desks. There's something gloomy and forbidding about a big business office, after hours. It gave me a funny feeling listening to the racket of our footsteps in all that thick quiet.

In a far corner were Kelrose and Malloy's offices with their names on the doors. I took Kelrose's sanctum sanctorum and Muldoon searched the other one.

There were a lot of interesting things in one desk drawer. There was a partnership insurance policy for a quarter of a million dollars. Finding that didn't do me any good. It made a big, juicy, additional motive for Martin Kelrose to kill his partner.

In another section of the drawer was a bank book for Melrose's personal account. The withdrawal column showed regularly weekly amounts of one hundred dollars. Beside each of these was a tiny check mark. I count-

ed them up to \$2100, in that book alone.

Buried beneath a pile of carbon letters was a neat stack, rubber-banded, of four other bank books. I glanced through them hurriedly and they all had the same checked hundred dollar withdrawals. The dates went back four years.

THE newspaper clipping was folded and tucked into the earliest of these bank books. It was dated January 8, 1938, and was already starting to turn yellow at the edges. It was a small back page item from the *Times* and it read:

OCEANVILLE MAN HIT-RUN VICTIM

Late last night Bart Bennet was struck by an automobile while crossing the street to his home at 55 Spray Street. With him at the time was his wife, Claire, who narrowly escaped injury herself. Bennet was removed to the Oceanville hospital where his injuries were reported serious. . . .

There were another couple of paragraphs, but I stopped reading suddenly, called out: "Hey, Chief Muldoon, come in here for a minute!"

He didn't answer. I turned toward the door and straightened up from where I'd been squatting at the desk drawers. That was quite a break. Instead of getting the gun butt squarely on the skull, it glanced off the side of my head, and the arm that wielded it went jarring across my shoulder.

My ears rang and water flooded my eyes from the sock, but I didn't go out. I grabbed that gun-arm and twisted it in sudden, reactive fury. The weapon clattered to the floor. Then my adversary wrapped an arm around my neck, held me in a headlock. I still hadn't got a look at him. There was only one thing left to do. I braced my feet apart, lunged forward, slammed him back against the wall.

His back hit the light switch and it clicked the scene into darkness. But he still kept one arm clamped tight around my neck, pressing against my windpipe. I couldn't breathe at all and

my struggles got weaker, weaker. Suddenly he let go, twisted and went flying out the door of the office.

I shook the cobwebs out of my brain, staggered after him. But I couldn't make it. Just as I saw the night watchman enter the outside office and go spinning as my assailant straight-armed him, I stumbled forward and fell flat on my face.

The watchman picked himself up, pulled a gun from his pocket and chased off in pursuit. I got up as strength returned to my limbs, picked up the gun which was still on the floor, and the newspaper clipping I had dropped. I stuffed both into my pocket.

Chief Muldoon hadn't been so lucky. He was stretched out on the floor in the next office, a red and blue swelling behind his ear. I lifted him into a swivel chair, got some ice water in a paper cup and sloshed it in his face. He came to, groaning. But he couldn't talk, yet. He just sat there, a glazed look in his eyes.

The old watchman came back, panting and puffing. "Got clean away," he managed. "Did you get a look at him, Mister?"

"No," I said. "But you sure picked a swell time to come up and scare him away. He was about to throttle me."

"You and the chief were up here quite awhile. I thought I'd better take a look and make sure everything was all right. Good thing I did." He stared at Muldoon. "Say, he looks to be in a bad way. Maybe we'd better call an ambulance."

"No," I examined the wound. I don't think there's any concussion. But you can call the cops to come down and get their boss. His legs will be like jelly for a while and I've got some other things to tend to."

I went out into the big open office, found the employment files after a ten minute search. I looked up Claire Vaughn, learned that she had come to work at the paper company in February, 1938. Her address was 55 Spray

Street. The space for past references was noticeably blank.

First making sure Muldoon was coming around all right, I left the building, headed the coupé straight for 55 Spray Street.

CHAPTER III

HELL'S HIRELINGS

I DROVE slowly down the ill-lighted, rottenly paved brick street, looking for Number 55. Suddenly the beam of the headlights lit up the figure of a solitary man, lounging in the shadows against a building. He quickly turned his back to the light, stepped out of sight into a doorway. I didn't think much about this at the moment.

But when I stopped in front of 55 I saw that it was directly across the street from where that man had been standing. I stared across at the darkened doorways. There was no sign of anyone. I shrugged and entered the ramshackle three-story frame building.

In the vestibule I lit a match, saw from a bell tab that B. Bennet lived in apartment 1 A and rang another button. The buzzer let me through the downstairs door and I went down a long hall to the rear flat. I waited until the door upstairs of the apartment I'd rung, opened, and someone called several times, impatiently, "Who is it?" and then slammed the door shut again. Then I pressed my ear to the door of 1 A.

Inside a man and a woman were arguing. In a shrill, hate-filled voice the woman squawked: "I told you before, that phone call was a wrong number. I'm getting sick of your dirty, jealous suspicions. Every time I even step out for a pack of butts or go to a show, you think I—"

"You're guilty!" the man cut in. His voice rasped on your nerves like a fingernail scraping brick. "You're guilty or you wouldn't get so mad. But you ain't going to get away with it much longer. Go ahead! Go on out and

meet him. My time's coming. Just you wait!"

Footsteps came toward the door then, angry, fast moving, with the clicking heels of a woman in temper. I pushed the bell. The footsteps stopped.

The woman's voice said: "Who—who is it?"

"Police," I lied. "Open up."

The lock turned and the door swung open. I pushed past the woman before she could do anything about it. She had blue-black hair that hung in a shoulder bob over a handsome mink jacket, and was smooth as strands of velvet. She was gorgeous, if you liked them slightly on the hard and dissipated side. Her slanting black eyes went saucer-wide and, curling back full, rouged lips, snarled:

"What do you want here?"

I didn't answer. I moved down a short dirty hall into an old-fashioned, furnished living room. The only light was from an ancient, frill-shaded lamp. The place was stuffy and un-definably malodorous.

In a corner, in a clutter of newspapers, books and magazines, was a middle-aged man, sitting in a wheel chair. His face was lined and twisted with the bitter look of an invalid.

"Sorry to bust in on you in the middle of the night like this, Mr. Bennet," I apologized. "But I want to talk to you and your wife."

"What about?" the woman said. The fur jacket hung open now and I saw that she was very slim, but in a sinuous way that made her tight-fitting maroon dress becoming.

"You're Claire Vaughn, secretary to Martin Kelrose," I said. "Are you not?"

She got very pale around the mouth and her lip rouge stood out like a scarlet gash. "Who are you?" she demanded. "How do we know you're a cop?"

IGNORING the question, I snapped out: "Your boss is missing, Claire. And today, his partner, Thomas Mal-

loy, was murdered. I was wondering if you had any information about either incident?"

She went stiff all over. If it was an act it was a corker. She screamed: "No! That—that can't be true. It—it's ridiculous. Who'd want to kill old Malloy?"

"The police think Martin Kelrose did it because Malloy found out he was embezzling firm funds. No one's seen him since you were with him, this morning."

She pushed both hands up into the thick black hair at her temples. "He—Kelrose—has been acting awfully strange lately. But—but—" She looked up at me, suddenly, a terrible fear deep in her soul, seeping right up through her eyes. "I don't know anything about it, mister, honest!"

"So he's the one, eh?" Bart Bennet croaked. "So it's Kelrose you've been seeing, eh? The old story, a woman falling in love with her boss!"

"Shut up, you old weasel. Shut up!"

She leaned toward him, her long-nailed fingers clawing at her sides. For a moment I thought she would leap at him. "It isn't Kelrose. It isn't anyone. It's just your rotten, evil mind."

A crafty look crossed the invalid's features. One corner of his thin mouth twitched. "You can't fool me. You and Kelrose have been double-crossing me. Four years I've rotted in this room, unable to go out, never seeing anybody, while you gallivant around." His voice rose to a wild shriek. "But you've reaped the harvest of your wickedness, now. The two of you are in trouble. You've killed Malloy. The two of you have cooked up some evil scheme!"

I stood, stunned. Bennet wheeled his chair around so that he faced me. "I saw the afternoon paper, Mister. I saw that ad. Malloy must have got onto them. He must have been a righteous man and knew that his partner was carrying on with my wife." His eyes glittered crazily. "He was going to expose them, but he

feared that they might try to stop him, so he put that ad in the paper. He—"

"Stop it, stop it!" Claire shrielled. "I can't stand this any longer!"

She turned, raced out of the room, out of the apartment. There was the clacking of her heels out in the hall. The outside door slammed, and then there was silence. I turned back to Bennet. His thin, clawlike hands were covering his face. His narrow shoulders were shaking. I said:

"Look, Mr. Bennet, I'm sorry all this has to happen. You've got to calm yourself now and answer some questions for me. I've got to know all the details about the blackmail you've been pulling on Martin Kelrose since he ran you down with his car four years ago and didn't stop."

BENNET dropped his hands. His eyes had that look of a person who would like to, but can no longer cry. His thin, twisted face didn't change expression. I saw now that he was not middle-aged after all. His hair was sparse and gray, but not from years. At close range it was obvious that he had aged prematurely, probably as a result of his infirmity.

He said: "I don't know what you're talking about. I—I want you to get out of my apartment."

"Listen, Bennet," I said. I couldn't waste time fencing. I needed information and fast. "Don't be a fool. Your wife is mixed up in Malloy's murder, somewhere. Maybe you are, too. What I want—"

I stopped. He wasn't even listening to me. His eyes were staring across the room. He started wheeling the chair, fast. He muttered: "Now I'll find out. She's slipped. I knew she would. There's something in that purse she doesn't want me to see. She always hides it or takes with her. Tonight she was too upset!"

He reached an end table, started to pick up his wife's pocketbook when three men walked into the room. They

all wore tight-fitting overcoats. They held three stubby automatics in their hands, all alike.

One was tall and skinny, almost, as a lamp post. The second man wore a lilac-colored hat, with a brim that was immense, gloves and a knotted scarf of the same sickly color. The third member of the trio had only half a face. Where his nose should have been there was nothing but a big, scar-edged hole, red and raw from the cold night air.

I knew them right away. They were the three thugs of my "nightmare," the ones who had forced me to phone in that ungodly advertisement.

The beanpole one said: "There he is, Lilacs. Frisk him."

They came right into the room. My hands were up plenty high, now. Lilacs shoved his enormous hat back on his head and gave me the frisk, patting over my clothes with his pudgy hands. He removed the gun I had.

"W-what is this?" Bart Bennet demanded from his wheelchair in a shrill voice. "You men can't break in here like this. Get out. Get out!"

The man without any nose took two steps. His hands flicked out in a swift arc, the fingers snap-whipping across Bennet's skull-like face. No-nose sucked breath through his mouth and around the cigaret in his teeth like the passionate breathing of a vamp in silent pictures.

"Shut up, Gimp!" he ordered. "We ain't bothering you. We just want handsome, here."

"Maybe you'd like to have me run another ad for you, eh, boys?" I tried to grin nonchalantly.

Beanpole flipped his gun, caught it by the muzzle. He said: "You shud-dup, too." He swung and slashed the gun viciously across my face, twice. The first time I lunged at him, clawing, blind with pain and fury. The second time that heavy butt hit my jaw I saw a big cloud of jet black bubbles burst in front of my eyes, and that was all.

CHAPTER IV

OLD HOMICIDE WEEK

THERE was this magic carpet and I was on it, floating around in midair, and below me, reaching futilely, cursing, was a man with no nose, a lug in a big purple hat and a beanpole of a fellow. I was having fun squirting ammonia into their faces with a water pistol. I was laughing like hell at their agonized screams. Then suddenly my magic carpet collapsed and I started to fall. I came spinning back into consciousness.

The sides of my head were wheezing in and out like a bellows, but I managed to move it and when my eyes became accustomed to the darkness I saw that I was in a very small room. It was so close I knew it couldn't possibly have a window.

By the painful process of moving first one stiffened limb, then another, I learned that I was lying on the floor, that my hands were tied, but my feet free.

I remained motionless, gathering my strength and my wits. I tried to piece together what had happened this night. I figured that the man I tangled with at the paper factory must be Malloy's killer. He had gone up there to get some telltale evidence he had previously forgotten. Possibly it was the clipping about Bart Bennet's accident. He had sneaked into the factory, clipped Muldoon, then come after me.

There was a chance, I mused, that it was the same guy I saw lurking across the street from Bennet's apartment house. He must have called Claire, told her to come out and meet him. She had done that. Meanwhile he had seen me go in there, figured I was getting to know too much and went and got his three gunmen to get me out of the way, the same ones he had hired to force me into running the murder ad in the paper.

I felt, if I could have got a glimpse of that man, I might have the answer to the whole thing. Perhaps it was

Kelrose. I shivered, thinking what that would mean to Doreen. But if Kelrose were the killer, why had he arranged to advertise a warning, supposedly by Malloy, that he, Kelrose, was going to kill Malloy?

I got off that mental merry-go-round, rolled to a corner, wedged against the walls and worked erect. From light filtering in under the door I now saw that I was in a closet that had been remodeled into a cubbyhole washroom.

SWAYING there in the dark, I tried to figure how I was going to get out of this, and worked at the cords that bound my wrists. Neither effort did any good.

Inching through the darkness toward the door, my hip bumped a wash-bowl and that gave me an idea. I prayed that my own personal habit of setting old razor blades atop the medicine cabinet, was a common one.

Tottering perilously I managed to climb up onto the bowl, turned my back to the cabinet, groped the tips of my fingers along the dusty top. I found what I was looking for. Several old blades were there. One dropped to the floor, but I grasped another one between thumb and forefinger, cutting the flesh a little but hardly noticing that. I clenched it tightly, eased down to the floor again.

It was just a matter of a few minutes of slow, careful work to get the blade in the right position. It went through the cords around my wrists like a hot knife through butter.

I chafed circulation back into my arms and moved to the door. I stuck out a foot and kicked at the door panels with all my might.

"Let me out!" I shouted at the top of my voice. "Let me out before I tear down this whole damned building!"

Before I had even finished yelling I was crouched on haunches, facing the door. My fists were balled. I was taut as tennis gut all over. Footsteps came to the door on the outside and a voice, cursing.

"I'll kick his teeth so far down his throat he can't holler," the voice promised.

A key grated in the lock. The door swung out and so did I. Coming up from the floor like that, I got a beautiful clear swing. My fist caught Beanpole right at the end of his long chin and his skinny neck snapped with a sickening noise. I followed through so fast and out of the lavatory that I stepped right on his stomach.

I found myself in a big garage. At the far side, in the doorway of a little office, stood No-nose and Lilacs. They were staring at me as though they didn't believe what they saw. While they were figuring it out I leaped into a car parked facing the street. I twisted the ignition key and had the heap rolling before they moved out of the office doorway.

It was an old touring car and as I hunched over the wheel, gunning her toward the big street doors, bullets ripped through the canvas top, made a scarred mess of the windshield. The gunfire echoed in the building like explosions in the grand canyon.

I came out onto the runway that led down into the old shore road. Turning right would take me into town, but I could see the pale glow of taillights of another car. I didn't want anything in my way on this narrow road. I steered in the opposite direction, out toward Seaside, the Kelrose estate.

Headlights swung out of the garage and after me before I'd gone five hundred yards. It was snowing now, fine flakes coming down thickly and blowing on a strong wind. I drove with my head out the side, my foot jammed against the accelerator to the floor.

EVERY curve the rear end skidded on the snow-dusted highway like a gang of kid skaters playing snap-the-whip. By taking these bends without let-up I kept those headlights behind me pretty much the same dis-

stance. But I couldn't keep it up forever. The law of averages would eventually sling me into a tree on one of those curves. And if I slowed, the car behind would catch up. I had enough of those three playmates for the evening.

Ahead the lights picked out the entrance to a side road, an old wagon path that led down to the private beach of Seaside.

I jammed the brakes, turned off the lights and swung into the rutted byway, with almost one movement. I slid in about twenty yards and cut the motor. Back on the highway lights played into view and the pursuing car sped past. I started to get out when a voice from the darkness ahead shouted:

"Hey, who's that?"

My hand flicked the headlight switch again. In the bright beam up ahead a town taxi was parked on the wagon trail. The driver was leaning against the side, smoking a cigarette.

I shut off the lights again, got out, walked up to him.

"What is this?" the driver laughed. "Old Home Week?"

"What are you doing out here?" I asked.

"Brought out a fare from the city—an old crippled guy. First he had me trail this guy and dame in a car, all over the city and when they headed out here we followed. Their buggy is parked ahead around the curve. The other two got out and started walking up the path and my crippled friend followed."

"Old Home Week is right," I told him. "Can you stand some excitement? Follow me. I'll probably need some help."

"Not me," the hackie said. "I got a hunch the dame is the crippled guy's wife and he's trailing her and the boy friend. I ain't getting mixed in no family squabbles. I wouldn't be waiting here, if the old guy hadn't got away before I could collect the fare."

I plunged on down the darkened

path, the flying snow cold on my bruised and aching face. If I was any good at figuring things out, the cabbie was right. Bart Bennet had trailed his wife, Claire, and the man she was carrying on with—most likely the murderer—out here. He had found something in her purse after the gunmen lugged me from his flat, which enabled him to catch up with them.

I came out on the south end of the beach near where a reef of rocks ran out to the old abandoned lighthouse.

Standing down near the reef, looking out toward the lighthouse, looming up out there like a big black ghost, a slight figure was silhouetted against the whipping snow. I walked noiselessly through the sand, called: "Doreen!"

She turned and looked for a moment as though she was going to run.

I said, "It's me, Doreen. Les."

CHAPTER V

LIGHTHOUSE TOMB

WE STOOD there in the quiet and the blowing snow, holding to each other. I outlined what had happened during the night. When I'd finished I asked:

"What are you doing out here, honey?"

She hunched the fur collar of her coat up around her ears. I felt her shiver. Wispis of her wheat-colored hair blew against my face.

"I—I couldn't sleep," she said. "I got up and took a walk down here on the beach. And then I heard what sounded like a shot, and shouting voices coming from out there." She pointed toward the lighthouse. "I was trying to work up courage to go out there when you came along."

That reminded me why I was there. "Doreen," I said. "We've got to hurry. No telling what we'll find out there, now. But we've got to go."

She took my arm and we started over the reef of rocks, picking our way carefully over some covered with

mossy slime and others half submerged in the water. Half way out a terrifying sound smashed the silence. It went: *Bong! Bong! Bon-bong!*

It came from the snow-blurred direction of the lighthouse. Slow, dolorous, like funeral chapel chimes.

"That lighthouse hasn't been in use for ten years!" Doreen said.

When we reached the little island the beacon bell again tolled ominously. This time its booming peal hurt my ears, so close it was, and brought a chilling premonition of some unknown horror that frosted my marrow.

I strained my eyes through the snow toward the vague, ghostly outline of the structure. There was no sign of light nor life. When the bell stopped again there was no sound save that of the surf breaking fiercely over rocks at the far, seaward side of the isle.

Clinging to one another, damp from spray, we climbed the short, steep path to the door of the lighthouse. I grabbed the rusty handle and swung the heavy door wide. It creaked like the shoes of a Disney giant. You could almost feel the dank blackness sweeping out at you from inside.

"There should be candles and matches just inside the door," Doreen whispered huskily.

I inched forward, hands outstretched, feeling the way like a blind person, inside the door and to the right. A bat squealed and flitted around our heads. Our legs bumped a table and Doreen fumbled her hand over its top.

"I have them," she said.

There was the scrape of the match, followed by a tiny, sulphurous flame. Doreen's hand and wrist showed slim and deathly white in the small area of light, holding the candle. The bell bonged again, echoed deafeningly in the hollow tower.

I LOOKED past the flare of the candle toward the center of the structure. A thick rope hung taut from the

gloom above. At the end of the rope swung a small, twisted figure. It had thinned gray hair, and spindly, deformed legs. The head was cocked crookedly, like a much abused rag doll. The tongue protruded slightly from between thin lips. The thick, taut bell rope was noosed tightly around Bart Bennet's neck and he was dangling there.

Almost directly beneath him a woman's figure sprawled face down on the floor in a pool of blood. Her face was turned away, but I didn't need to see it. The thick black hair, the sinuous figure and the maroon dress under the short fur jacket, were enough. Near Claire Vaughn Bennet's dead body was a silver plated pistol.

Doreen choked out a short, sharp scream, dropped the candle and fell through the suddenly enshrouding gloom toward me, her hands clutching.

"Les!" she screamed. "It's that corpse tolling the bell. Stop it, Les, stop it!"

My fingers ground mercilessly into her arms and she cut the hysterics. "Listen, Doreen," I said. "I know what you've been through, darling. I know how you feel, but you've got to get control."

In a few moments she tore my fingers from her arm. "I—I think I'll be all right now, Les," she said. "But why are they here? Who—who killed them? That dead girl is Claire Vaughn, dad's secretary. And that poor, hideous creature hung there—"

"Sh!" I stopped her. "Wait a moment"

I lit another candle, moved toward the gently swinging corpse, eyes glued on the little piece of white showing between the clenched fingers of one dead hand. I managed to work free that little crumpled slip of paper. It was a slip from a memo pad, letterheaded *Memo from Thomas Malloy*. On it was scrawled: "Meet me out in the hall at lunch time, darling. Important!"

That was what had been in Claire's purse, put her husband on her trail. It had told him who her lover was. I was pretty sure of it, too, then. Since Malloy was dead, this couldn't have been written by him. It must be the work of someone in his office. I had a hunch it was Malloy's secretary, Lederer.

BRIEFLY I went over this with Doreen. I told her: "Bennet was crazy with jealousy and the bitterness of a man kicked around by fate. Almost a helpless cripple, he was spurred on by the terrible false strength of insane fury, managed to drag himself out of the house and into a cab.

"He caught up with Claire and Lederer, probably at Lederer's place, trailed them around and out here. He dragged himself out to the lighthouse and cornered them. He shot and killed Claire in his crazed temper, but Lederer got to him before he could turn on him."

"But—but who hung Bennet up there, like—like that?" Doreen was holding my hand. I could feel the shaking of her whole body through the contact.

"Lederer. He knocked Bennet out, then hung him. He left the gun, so the thing would look like Bennet had shot Claire, then hung himself in remorse."

"But what were they doing out here, Les?"

"That I'm not sure of yet, honey. Listen! Listen, the next time the wind dies down."

At first there was nothing but the whistling of the blizzard and then it faded a bit as the wind changed direction and the sound came to us faintly, but unmistakably. The grating clang of metal against rock.

"Someone is digging!" Doreen cried.

We ran for the door. Outside we listened again for the sound, caught the direction and moved swiftly toward it. Over the rise of a short hill

of rock we looked down on a scene out of some mad *Fantasia*.

Fifty yards away, in the unearthly flickering light of an old lantern, a man was wielding a shovel. The wind was blowing the other way now, away from us. We moved toward the lantern without fear of being heard. When we were closer I whispered: "It's Lederer, Doreen. There's a gun lying next to him on the sand."

I spread one arm in front of her, signaling that she was to stay back. I crept up behind him, bent and scooped up the gun, leaped backward.

"All right," I shouted over the wind. "Drop the shovel, Lederer, and put your hands at the back of your head."

He turned slowly and let the shovel slip from his fingers. His hands raised as I had directed. In that ghastly light the muddy, yellow glow of his eyes held a catlike sheen.

I flicked a glance to the spot where Lederer had been digging. One arm and the back of a man's head, covered with sand, were already in view.

I said: "You shouldn't have buried Martin Kelrose in the first place, Lederer. Then you wouldn't have had to dig up the corpse again."

His dimples showed in a slight, grim smile. "I see you've learned a lot," he said calmly.

"Enough to figure your plans," I told him. "You were going to drag Kelrose's corpse back up to the light-house where Claire killed him this morning, and leave him there. Then it would look like poor Bennet had shot them both, before hanging himself. That would leave you clear."

"Look, Lane," the murderer said. "I've got fifty one-thousand dollar bills in my pocket. They're yours if you'll turn around and go back to the mainland and fade out of this picture."

"So Kelrose wasn't really embezzling, eh? You and Claire took the firm's money and jockeyed the books so it would look like Kelrose had been having steady helpings."

CHAPTER VI

BLOOD MONEY

SO FAR Doreen had been smart enough to remain hidden back of me in the darkness. I hoped she'd continue to do so. Lederer might talk freely if he thought there were no witnesses, I went on:

"I'll have to think awhile about your proposition. Meanwhile, tell me what brought things to a head? Claire was already blackmailing Kelrose for the hit and run job on her husband. She made him give her the job and took a hundred dollars every week in addition to her salary. Why didn't she get the fifty grand out of him the same way?"

"We tried!" Lederer burst out bitterly. "But the fool refused. He was getting tired of being milked. He said he would let the whole thing out into the light before he'd pay off on that scale. Anyhow, Malloy was wise that something was going on between Kelrose and Claire. He—"

"Ah!" I interrupted. "Now I'm getting it. Malloy himself, maybe, had a little crush on Claire. He thought Kelrose was secretly beating his time. He didn't know you and Claire were keen on each other. And so he had you check on Claire and Kelrose, maybe doing a little snooping of his own, in the bargain. You and Claire got panicky, saw that the whole thing might break right out into the open, any time, so you—"

I didn't get a chance to finish that. I heard Doreen, behind me, scream: "Look out, Les!"

I turned just in time to see the three hoods plowing through the sand toward us. They had discovered my trick, back on the highway, had followed out here.

"It's all right, boss," Lilacs shouted to Lederer. "We'll grab 'em!"

They were wrong about that. I cut loose with the gun and got the Beanpole in the shoulder before Lederer reached around and smashed the

gun out of my hand. Part of my coat ripped off in his clutching fingers and I leaped toward Doreen, grabbed her hand. Yanking her after me, I hit the noseless thug with one shoulder, bowled him out of the way and staggered on toward the lighthouse.

Slugs whined and ricocheted off rocks around us. Doreen stumbled, but I didn't even slow down. I dragged her flying after me, until she stumbled back into balance, and we zigzagged like broken field runners trying to stay out of the way of the beams of probing flashlights that the thugs had suddenly switched on, and the whistling bullets.

"We'll never be able to beat those bullets across the reef," I shouted as we neared the lighthouse. "We're going inside."

We swung into the big doorway, bullets plunking into the wood frame, splintering it. Inside I lit a match, cupped it. In the faint light a ladder led to the top of the tower at the other side of the cobwebbed room. We stepped over Claire's body, past the swinging corpse of Bennet, toward the ladder. I boosted Doreen onto the high first rung.

"Climb like hell!" I ordered.

LEDERER and his trio stood outside and poured lead into the lighthouse through the doorway. They were afraid I might have another gun, be waiting inside to pot them as they stood highlighted in the entrance. The bullets spanged about the stone walls, bouncing from one to the other. Shouts entered, echoed up the tower after us.

A bullet struck the corpse of Bennet, or maybe it was the wind, but it swayed and the big bell above us rang out a deafening, clanging complaint.

We were almost to the top when the others ventured inside. Their flashlights played about, into dusty corners and behind crude, wooden furniture. By the time someone shouted, "Ladder!" and the pocket

torches started their beams upward, Doreen and I were climbing over a small balcony that encircled the tower.

In the light from the flashes below I saw another smaller ladder to my right. It climbed to a big old-fashioned kerosene burner beacon light. At the bottom of the ladder stood a barrel of oil.

Doreen cried: "Les, I can hear them. They're coming up after us, We—we're trapped!"

"Stand back," I ordered. I strode over to the oil barrel, grabbed it, rolled it, tilted on one edge, toward the railing of the balcony.

I glanced down and a slug sang past my ear. I saw the black outlines of the others and their glaring flashlights not more than twenty feet below the balcony. I ducked back and whipped matches from my pocket. I ripped off half a dozen at once, struck them altogether. Holding my arms across my eyes, I tossed them, lighted, into the half-filled barrel of oil.

Roaring bursts of hot flame exploded toward the room. Doreen screamed and fell back. Excited, wondering yells came up the ladder.

I dropped my arm and squinting against the terrific glare of the burning oil, stepped toward the barrel, pushed it slightly and got my hand on the bottom. With one swift lunge I lifted and tilted the flaming barrel over the railing.

A waterfall of liquid fire cascaded down the ladder. Agonized screams filled the echoing tower and hardly before the first loud splat of the falling, burning oil hit the bottom, there were sounds of the dull, horrible plop of a human body striking stone after a long fall.

Then I hung over the railing and stared down in the light from the flaming pool of oil at the foot of the ladder just as the three thugs hit the bottom almost simultaneously.

One lone scream persisted, hung in the air, then wailed out into silence.

Turning away, fighting the sickening pull of my stomach, I moved toward Doreen. Her hand was flung up before her face and she swayed. I stepped toward her, raised my hand, slapped her soundly. She shook her head, blinked and tried to smile.

"Thank you, Les," she said. "No sense in fainting after it's all over."

WE CLIMBED back down the ladder slowly, guarding carefully against the shaking reaction of our limbs and trembling fingers, letting us off backward into space.

I took Doreen past the huddle of motionless figures in the still slightly flaming pool of oil, with her face turned against my chest. Outside in the cold cleanness of the night and the snow, she stopped and clung to me hard.

"I heard everything you and Lederer said, back there," she whispered. "Dad's dead, isn't he, Les. Buried back there in the sand."

I said: "Yeah, honey, but at least we know, now. And we know he didn't kill old Malloy. Lederer must have done that job himself. Claire, though, I think was the one who murdered your father. She could have cut back into the garden where he was, this morning. There's a path leads from there down to the beach."

"Somehow she made him come out here, and shot him. It was all prearranged. Lederer came out then, and they buried your dad out there in the sand."

Doreen shuddered. "You—you can tell me the rest tomorrow or—or sometime, Les. I don't want to hear any more, tonight."

We made our way back across the reef then, to the beach, and up to the house. Later, down at headquarters I had to explain some things several times over to Muldoon. He catches on quick.

"But that ad?" he said. "What about that?"

"I already told you twice," I said. "Claire's and Lederer's basic idea, now that their blackmail racket was about over, was to get a nice big grubstake and beat it away somewhere where they wouldn't have to worry about Claire's husband."

"Yeah? And—"

"They knew they couldn't just steal the dough and skip. It could be pinned on them too easily. So they fixed the books and framed Kelrose for the missing money. To fix the guilt for sure, they killed him, buried the corpse so he would be 'missing.'"

"But after Lederer realized he neglected to eliminate evidence at the paper factory and with me hot on their tails, they decided to come out to the lighthouse where Kelrose was killed and buried, one last time, make sure everything was covered. No footprints in the sand, fingerprints, things like that. They had to kill Malloy because he was already suspicious of relations between Claire and Kelrose, might get wise to the whole thing."

"Look!" Muldoon massaged his bald head, screwed his features like a monkey. "Look, Lane, I want to know about that advertisement! Why—"

"That was what Lederer and Claire cooked up for the perfect touch," I cut him short. "To throw the complete frame right around Kelrose's dead neck. They figured—and you proved them right—that nobody would believe my screwy story—that Malloy had placed that ad, himself. Lederer, as Malloy's secretary, found it easy to forge that phony letter about the embezzling. That would give the reason for Malloy's fearing death from Kelrose."

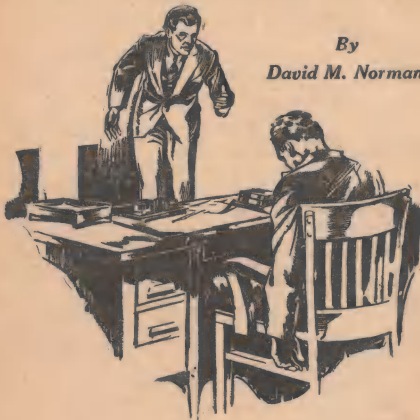
"Oooooooooo!" Muldoon said profoundly.

It was broad daylight out now. I left the police station and headed for Seaside. Doreen would need me more than ever now.

The Elusive Corpse

By

David M. Norman



Johnny Drake had another murder mystery to solve. But just when he thought everything was in the bag, the corpus delicti took it on the lam.

JOHNNY DRAKE turned his cheap coupé into the winding road which led up to Russell Wayne's seashore estate. It was a gloomy place, sprawled over twenty acres of land heavy with shrubs and trees. Wayne liked privacy and he could afford it.

Johnny Drake stopped the coupé in front of the big house and climbed the porch steps, still trying to figure out why Wayne had phoned him and de-

manded his immediate presence at the house. Wayne could do that too—the demanding. Johnny Drake had to obey. There were reasons.

The door opened and Wayne was standing there, his face dour. In the six months since Johnny had last seen him, he thought Wayne looked thinner, wan and nervous.

"Well, come in," Wayne snapped. "Hurry!"

He led Drake into a huge living

room, motioned to a chair and sat down close by. Now Johnny Drake was certain of it. There was something very wrong with Wayne.

"It's been six months since you worked for me, Drake," Wayne said.

"Do we have to go through all that again?" Drake asked.

"A review will not hurt. You worked for me in the Wayne Galleries—the most famous art sales rooms in the world now. I trusted you and then—a certain, easily disposed of picture disappeared. I found it in another shop—a cheap place. You were identified as the man who had sold it."

"And I still deny that," Drake said. "I didn't steal your picture."

"Circumstances indicate that you did," Wayne went on. "I was very decent about the matter and let you go. Even though I could have sent you to prison. Now there is something you must do for me."

"It must be good," Drake said, "if you called me in."

"When you left me," Wayne said, "you started in a small business. A private detective agency and I require the services of a detective I can trust now. There is something you must get rid of for me. I'll pay well."

Drake nodded. "Then we work on the principle of a detective and his client. Show me what you want to get rid of and I'll name the fee."

"All right," Wayne said. "Follow me."

THEY left the room and walked down a long corridor. There was a light streaming from the study. Drake skidded to a halt and looked in. The man behind the desk was about thirty-five, slender, with a wispy mustache and an eternal expression of being browbeaten.

"So you're still with Wayne," Drake said. "And I still don't like you, Owen."

Mark Owen got up and came into the hall. Wayne tugged at Drake's sleeve impatiently, but the detective brushed him off.

Mark Owen spoke in a meek tone.

He was always meek and that was why Johnny Drake had never warmed up to him.

"I'm sorry you dislike me, Johnny," he said. "I thought we'd become friends after I went to work for Mr. Wayne. Then—that unfortunate incident—"

"Yes—very unfortunate," Drake said. "What are you doing here? Since when does the boss bring his hired help home?"

"Drake," Wayne snapped, "Owen is here at my request. He is doing some cataloguing for me and he isn't interested in your abuse any more than I am. Come along."

Drake shrugged and followed Wayne to the extreme rear of the huge house. Wayne opened a door and indicated that Drake was to step in. He did, and saw a man seated in a large chair. The room was dimly lighted, but enough so that he could readily study the man in the chair.

He was a middle-aged, partly bald and yet a rather nice looking sort. Nice looking except for one thing. He had only one eye. The other had been blasted out by a bullet which had also torn half of the back of his head off.

"Now don't start asking a lot of questions," Wayne said. "The man is dead. His name was Sid Tyler and he lived in a cottage just beyond the limits of my estate. Take the corpse there and arrange things to look as though a burglar shot him. You can name your own fee, but get this done promptly."

"Now wait a minute," Drake snapped. "I'm not getting myself involved in any murder."

"It was self-defense, you idiot. Do I look like a murderer?"

"Then you killed him?" Drake asked.

"Certainly I did. The man apparently slipped into my home and was snooping around. I thought he was a thief, called to him and he started running. I fired and—you see what happened."

"Nix," Drake said, "I wouldn't

touch this with the end of a flagpole. Not for any fee."

"For your freedom then?" Wayne asked sarcastically. "I can still send you to prison, Drake, and I will unless you do as I say. Move the corpse back to Tyler's cottage. You know about those things—I don't. And stop looking at me that way. I tell you it was self-defense."

"It looks like it," Drake said softly. "You thought he was a thief. He ran away from you and you fired. How come the bullet went through his eye if he was running away? How did he happen to stumble into this room and sit down so comfortably? Listen, Wayne, I've tried to study this detective business and I know a few wrinkles. Don't try to kid me."

"I won't talk about it any further," Wayne said. "Either you do as I say, or I'll make a formal complaint against you. Obey me and I'll give you five thousand dollars and a clean bill of health in the form of a recommendation dated well after that bit of sneak thievery you pulled at my galleries."

JOHNNY DRAKE grinned tightly. "You seem to forget, Wayne, that I've got more on you now than you have on me."

"You'll still go to jail," Wayne said. "I'll see to that. At the best, you'll lose your detective license and probably be barred from ever getting a job again."

Drake frowned. Wayne was right about that, but even more, he wanted to find out what this was all about. He decided to take a chance.

"All right—I'll do it. When will I get paid and receive those clearance papers?"

"Come to my galleries in the morning," Wayne said. "Now hurry—please."

Drake sent Wayne after towels to wrap the dead man's head with. While the strange owner of the house was gone, Drake hastily examined the dead man's pockets. They contained nothing of any significance. The body was cold, but *rigor mortis* hadn't set in, indicat-

ing that he'd probably been killed no earlier than right after dark. It was now a few minutes beyond midnight.

Drake carried the corpse out the back door and found that his car was already there and waiting. Mark Owen climbed out and held the door while Drake carefully placed the dead man inside.

"That's pretty decent of you, Drake," Owen said. "Mr. Wayne told you the truth too. I was with him."

"Look," Drake said, "Wayne has something rotten up his sleeve or he wouldn't be risking arrest. If he shot the man in self-defense, why doesn't he call in the cops?"

"Because he has a big deal on tonight. Biggest thing in the history of the Wayne Galleries and that's going some, Drake. Furthermore, after tonight, Wayne will be much too busy to answer the questions of police. That's why he wants this matter taken care of in such a manner as not to involve himself."

Drake didn't answer. He ran around the back of the car, got in beside the corpse and shivered. Owen gave him some directions on how to reach the dead man's home and Drake drove there.

He parked close to the front door, made sure he was unobserved and carried the body inside. With every step he knew this was probably the most asinine thing he'd ever done in his life. Wayne had been all wrong about his being a thief even though things pointed squarely at him. But that was peanuts compared to the spot he'd be in when this little matter was aired.

He placed the body on a bed, turned on lights and started to look around. Apparently the dead man had been a sculptor—and a good one too. Part of the cottage had been converted into a studio. A large room containing a number of life size statues. Drake shivered. He didn't like this place. Those sculptured figures, for instance, seemed almost ready to come to life.

A further examination of the place

revealed only two other interesting items. The dead man had been a student of spiritualism. His library was almost entirely composed of books on the subject. Besides that, Sid Tyler was also a member of the Civilian Defense—plane spotter stationed on this lonely stretch of beach to keep an eye out for planes that might come over.

Drake left the studio cottage and hurried out to the beach. He never did believe that Wayne had murdered this man. The art connoisseur's story was too badly fumbled. Perhaps he believed it, but not Drake. Therefore, he had to find the reason for Tyler's death.

He reasoned that Tyler must have gone out on the beach, seen something and been killed. Drake transferred a gun to his side coat pocket and stood on the edge of Tyler's property, to look up and down the shore. It seemed deserted.

THEN Drake squinted straight out to sea. Dimly, he noticed a large object about half a mile out. He studied this intently and made up his mind that it was a fairly large ship of some kind and utterly blacked out.

Drake didn't hesitate. He rushed back to the house, appropriated some of the dead man's clothing to replace his own and then hurried across the beach. He ran into the surf and began swimming toward the craft. Halfway there, he suddenly turned left. There was a small boat, manned by two men who used muffled oars. It was heading toward shore. Now Drake was positive this strange craft had something to do with Wayne's worries and the murder of Sid Tyler.

He was a powerful swimmer and it didn't take long to reach the craft. It proved to be a dirty looking freighter with a Spanish name printed on her prow. She was at anchor so Drake swam around until he clung to the anchor chain and rested.

Now and then he heard someone pacing the deck. A watch was being maintained. He began to wonder if the craft had something to do with espionage—

if Wayne were an enemy who'd posed for many years under the guise of an art dealer. Things like that had happened before.

Drake seized the anchor chain firmly and started climbing. He reached the deck and took a quick look. Even though blacked out, three men were visible as they were silhouetted against the shore. These three kept moving about.

Drake waited until the after portion of the deck was clear. Then he slipped up, darted behind a hatch and lay prone. One of the men, standing watch amidship, lit a cigarette. The glow of the match revealed that a number of carefully wrapped articles were laid out as if arranged for quick transfer ashore.

Then Drake's eyes grew wide and he felt a shiver come over him. Some of those bundles looked like human beings and in the glow of the match, he saw a stiff hand protruding from one—a human leg from another. He made a quick decision. Whatever this was, it looked like more than he could handle alone. He gauged the distance to the anchor chain and tensed to make a run for it. This job required the help of cops—and plenty of them.

Then one of the men called out. "Dory coming back. Stand by sea ladder."

Two more men appeared from below decks and took up stations not far from where Drake was hidden. Escape seemed impossible now so he just lay prone and hoped the beating of his heart which seemed louder than a gong to him, wouldn't be heard by these men.

They were talking in low voices. He only caught snatches of their conversation, but they spoke in fluent English. So fluent, in fact, that it was studded with hard-boiled phrases and slang.

Then the dory bumped against the side of the freighter and a couple of minutes later Drake gasped when he saw Russell Wayne's head appear above deck. The art dealer was helped

aboard and he shook hands with the man who was apparently the captain. The man who had issued orders to stand by.

Drake heard him talk and frowned. He'd spoken in perfect English before, but now his words were punctuated with a definite Spanish accent.

"Welcome, señor. You have looked at other objects, *si*? They are satisfactory?"

"Yes, yes," Wayne said. "How many more are there?"

"Fifty—sixty, señor. All of the very best. You wish that we should take them ashore at once, eh? *Bueno*—it shall be done."

WAYNE went to the rail and called out Mark Owen's name. The art expert came on deck and knelt beside some of the objects. He spoke to Wayne very softly.

"Very well," Wayne told the captain. "You may send the rest of it ashore."

"At once, señor. Now you wish to return, eh? That too shall be done."

Drake waited until the dory had put off again. Then he started moving toward the rail himself. He heard a startled grunt and looked up to see a bulky man coming at him. No alarm had been given. Apparently this sailor wasn't sure whether or not Drake belonged on the ship.

Drake let him get very close before he straightened up from his half-crouched position. As he did so, both fists lashed out. He caught the man on the cheek with his left, on the jaw with a well-timed right. But the sailor was as tough as he looked. He rocked back with the blows and gave a wild yell as he lunged toward Drake.

Drake dodged the rush, stuck out a foot and the man plunged on deck. Drake bent over him and used a fist with precision and science. The sailor passed out. His yell brought the others to attention, however, and two of them were racing toward Drake.

The private detective caught the gleam of guns and went into action

before the pair even reached him, or had time to raise the guns. He bowled one man over, forced the other back and knocked the gun out of his fist. Drake hammered two short jabs to the middle. The man doubled up. His hands clutched at Drake's borrowed shirt, fastened there hard and as Drake pulled away, the wet shirt was ripped from his back.

He whirled, raced across the deck and vaulted the rail. Water closed over his head. He was forced to surface after a minute. His lungs ached from lack of air. The freighter was still very close by. He could see men lining her rails and he wondered why they didn't open fire. Then he smiled a little and began swimming leisurely away.

They didn't dare shoot. There were shore patrols all around the area, bombers and pursuit planes apt to fly over at any moment. The sound and flame of guns would be spotted. For some reason this freighter didn't want that to happen.

Drake reached shore, crawled up on the sand and lay down for a couple of minutes to steady his tired muscles. He didn't have to wonder about his next move. From where he lay, Russell Wayne's house was quite visible. He saw headlights moving away from it. They turned onto the road in the direction of the murdered Sid Tyler's place.

Drake arose and ran as fast as he could toward the studio cottage. He bolted inside, shuddered at the sight of the dead man on the bed. Then he hastily peeled off his borrowed clothing and climbed into his own dry ones.

This done, he worked hurriedly to complete his plans. When the car finally pulled into the driveway, Drake was a few hundred feet from the cottage. He saw Wayne get out and enter the place with obvious reluctance. Drake walked back.

Wayne met him and the art dealer had a gun in his fist. He lowered the weapon when he recognized the private detective.

"Where the devil have you been?"

he demanded. "Where is the corpse?"

Drake gaped at him. "You mean Tyler? Why—I put the body on the bed and left it there while I went out for a look around."

"You are not to become too inquisitive," Wayne snapped. "What room is the body in? I've looked all over the house. Drake, if you've tricked me, I'll have your scalp—"

DRAKE pushed by him, looked in the bedroom and gulped. "But I tell you I put the body right on that bed. Look—the towels I wrapped around his head are still there. Wayne, I don't like this."

"You don't like it," Wayne derided. "How do you suppose I feel? Find that body, Drake. Find it, do you hear me?"

"Look," Drake argued, "I'm in this up to my neck right now. Yet I don't even know what it's all about. I—Wayne, the dead man was a student of spiritualism—ghosts and things. You can see his whole library is on the subject. I wonder—"

"Nonsense," Wayne snapped. "There are no such things as ghosts. My opinion is that you must be holding out on me. I warn you, Drake—"

"Stop kidding yourself, Wayne. You're as scared as I am. There are lots of things in this world that human beings don't understand. Tyler was studying one of these. Me, I'm finished. You can have me heaved into jail, but I'm not monkeying around this place another second."

"Come back to my house," Wayne ordered. "I'll drive you."

Drake shook his head. "Thanks. It looks as though you're willing to cooperate, unless you're just trying to get me away from here. I'll be over in a few minutes. Somebody stole the corpse and I'm willing to take a quick look. Anyone been prowling around the beach, Wayne?"

"No. It's off season and anyway this section of the beach is strictly private. You'd better come with me."

"I'll stay," Drake insisted. "But not long. You go on ahead."

Wayne hurried off. Drake waited until the headlights had disappeared and then he darted into the studio room where a number of cleverly sculptured figures loomed like grim, grey ghosts in the semigloom.

Drake found heavy canvas and wrapped it around one of these figures. It was heavy enough to bow him down, but he managed to carry it onto the beach. There was some activity there. The dory had unloaded some of those wrapped objects and two men were left ashore to carry them to Wayne's house. The others were unguarded for a moment or two.

Drake needed only that length of time to put his plan into action. He faded through the darkness and reached Wayne's front door about fifteen minutes later.

Mark Owen let him in and Owen was obviously very shaken.

"Mr. Wayne told me that Tyler's corpse had disappeared. Drake, if this is a trick—"

"I don't play tricks with cadavers," Drake snapped. "What's going on around here anyway? Where is Wayne?"

Owen led the way to the rear of the house. He tapped on a closed door and Wayne came out.

"No," Drake answered his silent questions, "I found no trace of Tyler's corpse. I'm going to the police. If it means a couple of years in the pen for that frameup theft charge you hold over me, that's okay. I'd rather serve it than be heaved into a death cell."

"You'll remain here," Wayne snapped. "Even if I have to draw a gun on you. I won't allow anything to break up my plans. Not now. Owen—he carried a gun. Get it!"

Drake started to reach for the weapon and froze. Wayne had been concealing his gun behind his back. Mark Owen searched Drake with an expertness that surprised the detective. He removed the gun and also a pair of handcuffs.

Wayne gestured with the gun and Drake walked slowly into the room

where he'd found Tyler's body slumped in the chair. The door closed and a key turned. Drake sighed, switched on every light he could find and then started to sit down.

THERE was a gouged mark in the further wall. He went over to it and saw that a bullet had plowed its way through the plaster. He digested that bit of evidence and tried to assimilate it with the strange ship just off shore, with Mark Owen's presence in the house and Wayne's insistence that he be subjected to no interference.

Then Drake heard footsteps in the corridor outside. They were shuffling steps and very heavy too—as if the men were moving under a great weight. He put his ear against the door and heard several thuds and then sighs of relief.

Drake peered through the keyhole, but he couldn't see a thing. He smiled a little and felt gratified for the hunch that caused him to look because Wayne had removed the key from the lock.

Drake fumbled in his pocket and took out a leather key container. He checked over the keys and found one that looked as though it might fit this ordinary house lock. He tried it and by considerable pressure succeeded in turning the mechanism back.

He didn't try to leave, however. There were too many people in the house. His intentions were to rush Wayne, overpower him and get his gun. Then Owen, who should be a pushover.

The low talking stopped in one of the rooms across the hall, several men walked swiftly away and Drake figured the time was ripe. He opened the door a crack. Nothing happened. He stepped into the hall, closed the door behind him and catfooted his way to the next room. It was dimly illuminated and filled with those wrapped objects which Drake had seen on the freighter. Nobody seemed to be there so he went in and approached the nearest of the objects.

Suddenly he heard a scraping sound. He wheeled, just too late. Mark Owen stood there, Drake's own gun trained on him. Owen no longer looked meek. His lips were drawn back in a snarl and he seemed to have grown a few inches.

"Still snooping around, Drake? Don't you ever learn that minding your own business is much healthier?"

"Put that gun down," Drake said in a steady voice. "Put it down, Owen, or so help me, I'll slap you right from between your ears."

Owen laughed. "I don't think you could. If I had time, I'd give you the chance to try. Get your hands up."

Drake bristled. He sensed that Owen had changed radically, but he still remembered the meek yes-man, whom Wayne had hired. Drake took a single step toward him.

The gun blazed. Drake twisted around and clapped a hand to his side. He'd taken a bullet there—a superficial wound and the slug had continued on its way to slap into the wall. Still, that hurt and Drake learned a lesson. Owen wasn't just desperate. He was as tough as any hoodlum, and just as dangerous.

"The next one," Owen warned, "will sink right between your eyes, smart guy. Now reach!"

Drake obeyed that order. The door behind Owen opened suddenly. He turned swiftly and Drake tensed to jump him. The gun swerved back and Drake stopped short. Wayne stood just inside the door, a look of the most intense awe on his face.

"Get over there beside Drake," Owen snapped. "Come on—move. I'd as soon plug you, Wayne, as I would Drake. Yes, it's meek Mark Owen giving orders. You should know how to take them, Wayne. You can certainly dish them out."

"But Owen," Wayne protested feebly, "I don't quite understand."

"You will," Owen grinned. He backed to the door and yelled.

A MINUTE later a burly man entered. The moment he spoke, Drake recognized the voice. It was the captain of the freighter and he still posed as a South American.

"There is trouble, señor?"

"Some," Owen said. "Nothing I can't handle. It's all on account of this snooping private detective over there beside Wayne. I think he's tumbled."

The captain dropped his pose. He drew a clasp knife from his pocket, opened the large blade and licked his lips.

"I'll take care of him. Both of them for that matter. We got what we wanted."

"Captain Ramos," Wayne cried, "you're mad. I don't know what Drake has done, but I assure you my money is good. We made a deal. I didn't cheat you."

Drake looked around the room. "Wayne," he said, "I think you just got the greatest gypping of your life. How much did you pay for all this junk?"

"Junk?" Wayne gasped. "Drake, these objects you see come from some of the greatest museums and galleries of Europe. They were smuggled out—brought to South America and hidden until a buyer could be found."

"They're still junk," Drake said. "How much did they cost you?"

"A quarter of a million," Wayne groaned. "I'm sure you must be wrong. Owen looked them over and he knows art better than I do. He swore to their authenticity."

"Sure he did. Look, Mr. Wayne, Owen worked for you just to sound you out. You accepted him as an expert and he knows next to nothing about art. Think back—he had something to do with this deal right from the start, didn't he?"

Wayne nodded glumly and looked over at Owen. The crook moved forward.

"You weren't cheated," he said. "Not one red cent, but this stuff happens to be hot. Anything swiped from Europe these days, is hot. Go on—look

at the stuff if you don't believe me."

Wayne took that suggestion and began unpeeling the canvas off several life-size statues.

"They wouldn't dare turn up all the lights," Drake said. "And Wayne, how many shots did you fire at Tyler?"

"One," Wayne replied and continued examining the figures. He moved over to another life-sized one still wrapped in canvas.

"Then you didn't kill him. Your bullet is in the wall. It was all a trick to make you take the blame. Tyler was murdered on the beach. He was a sculptor and could tell the difference between valuable property and this stuff. Some of the goods were left on the beach and he found them. That's why he was killed—to keep his mouth shut, but it won't stay shut. Tyler's body disappeared, but I found him. He isn't as dead as you think."

"What did you say?" Owen yelled. "Drake, you're trying to frighten us—"

"Oh, no I'm not. After Wayne left Tyler's cottage, I had a look around. I saw Tyler rising out of the sea. He was a grey color and moved like a robot. He was dead, Owen. You know just how dead he was—so do I. Nobody can live with the back of his head blown off, but Tyler did."

The captain slowly lowered the knife he held. "Owen," he said, "maybe he is right. There was someone on board the ship a little while ago. One of my men tore the shirt off him. It had the name of Sidney Tyler on the collar band."

"Nonsense," Owen snapped. "You beat it and make sure all the money stays intact. I'll stay and take care of—"

OWEN suddenly stiffened and his eyes opened very wide. Wayne had finished removing the canvas wraps from the figure he was working on. Wayne let out a shriek and drew back.

Sidney Tyler stood there—lifelike

except for his deathly grey color. A smear of blood was on his cheek, but his eyes seemed to be alive and burning in wrath.

The captain wheeled and streaked out of the house. Owen fired two shots. Both hit the grey figure, but it didn't fall. Owen let out a yowl and at that moment Drake charged. Owen fired one more shot that missed a mile. He hardly had the strength to hold the gun level. Drake hit him below the knees and in half a minute Owen lay very limp and still. Drake searched him, found his handcuffs and applied them.

Then he seized the telephone and called the nearest police station. He made a swift explanation.

"We've got the killer right here. Have coast guardsmen and army patrols watch for that freighter. Make the captain turn over the money he got from Wayne."

Wayne came over beside Drake. "I guess you were right, Drake. All the way through. But that—that lifelike

statue—it had me fooled for a moment."

"It scared me too," Drake grinned. "I hid Tyler's corpse. I found this statue he'd made of his own likeness and applied a little paint in the right places. You built up his disappearance and I figured when Owen saw this, he'd break. I'll even bet you that rat really stole the picture you accused me of taking—because he wanted me out of the store so he could operate without my horning in."

"Are you satisfied that the stuff you bought is junk? Sure, I can see that. It was neat—bringing that tramp freighter here. Just like prohibition days, wasn't it? You got the stuff right off the boat."

"Drake," Wayne said glumly, "you're hired back."

"Not me," Drake grinned. "I like this job better."

"Then I'll retain you on a permanent basis. As a private detective, Drake. I need someone to guard me—from making a jackass out of myself."

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Dead Man's Snare

By Henry Bela Bachrach



Because he protected a black-sheep brother, Steve Craig lost his shield and became the prime suspect in a big-time burglary. And when Craig followed a hunch to recover the hot ice, he was slated to wind up on destiny's cold slab.



GAIL'S apartment was barely two minutes behind Steve Craig when the sirens began to howl in the downtown district. Steve leaned forward to tap the cabby's shoulder, but the man had already

switched the radio to the police wave length.

Steve ran a hand through close-cropped sandy hair and sank back, chuckling, very pleased over the fact that he wasn't on duty. The police sirens faded toward the north end of town, and he thought suddenly of old Jonathan Norton, Gail's uncle, sitting out there in the mansion at the north tip of the city. Sitting there and trying to tell Gail how to run her life—yes, and spending all that remained of the Norton fortune on his passion for rare diamonds.

Only tonight when Steve and Gail had dropped in at the big house, the old man had brought out a new stone—a diamond worth a hundred thousand anyway, according to insurance figures. But once he'd shown off his new treasure, he'd made it plain that Steve wasn't welcome. And as he came back into town in the cab, Gail's excuses hadn't made Steve feel any better.

"You can't blame him really, Steve," she'd said. "He's been father and mother to me for a long time and he's anxious to have me marry the right man. He—he's afraid you'll turn out like Ed."

Steve's rough-hewn face tightened. There it was again. Ever since his older brother had slid into the ranks of the cheap crook, the petty thief living just inside the law, Steve had had to live that fact down.

From the front of the cab, the radio blared: "Patrolman James Belmont was killed in the chase. Jonathan Norton's statement that the thief was Ed Craig, underworld character of this city, was verified by the maid who interrupted the burglar's work. Belmont is believed to have wounded Craig. Craig is slender, blond—"

Steve's lean, rawboned body went rigid as he waited for the repeat. Two minutes later it came.

Old Jonathan Norton's house, the house Gail and he had left barely an hour before, had been entered and the hundred-grand stone had been taken

from the safe. The maid's screams on discovering the thief had brought a cop. Jonathan Norton, his own gun in hand, had joined the patrolman in the chase which had ended with the patrolman's death. Jonathan Norton had identified the thief as Ed Craig!

THERE was no more leaning back against the cushions for Steve Craig then. He had the door half open when the cab squealed to a halt in front of his apartment building. He ran across the sidewalk, barged into the empty lobby of the building, and headed for the elevator.

So Ed had finally stepped across the border line and become a thief, a murderer—a cop killer! Somehow, Steve couldn't believe it. Not of Ed. Ed wouldn't have the nerve to shoot anyone.

But whether he believed it or not, he knew he had to find Ed before the cops did. And he knew right where to look. There was only one man Ed came to when he was in trouble. That man was Steve himself.

There wasn't a sound inside his apartment. The window on the fire escape was wide open, the shade moving back and forth in the draught. Steve went over to the window and looked out.

There wasn't anyone out there on the fire escape, but his hand on the sill went rigid. He had put it down in something that was warm, wet and sticky. He didn't need to strike the match to know what it was. But he struck it just the same.

There was a big pool of blood on the sill where his hand had been, and little drops of it had formed a trail across the rug to the bedroom door.

The trail pulled him like a magnet. "Ed," he called hoarsely. "Ed!"

He was there, sprawled across the bed. And the bed was soaked with his blood. He was still alive, but he was slipping away fast. He'd been hit twice—high in the chest and in the side.

For long, tense seconds Steve thought he was going to die without

coming to. But he opened his eyes finally, saw Steve and smiled.

"Hello, Steve," he whispered. "I—I—"

He choked, and Steve said: "Ed. The diamond? That cop—"

Ed's voice was bitter, faltering. "You'll never find it. It's hot ice. Norton'll never find it either. But he'll always be—warm. Yeah. Norton warm and the diamond hot. . . ."

It wasn't until seconds after he'd stopped speaking that Steve realized his brother was dead.

Steve called Homicide, wearily, automatically; and then on sudden inspiration he started searching Ed's clothes.

There was only one thing that looked queer. Folded in Ed's wallet was the ragged half of a thousand-dollar bill. . . .

Del Cunningham, fat, bald, and shrewd-eyed, took charge when Homicide arrived. He didn't bother Steve, didn't even want to hear his story—until he found the gun and diamond were missing.

Everything changed then. A little pin point of suspicion grew in Cunningham's eyes. And when the torn bill turned up, the pin point flared into white flame. There were questions, questions, questions. And then Cunningham was holding out his pudgy, little hand and saying:

"Sorry, Steve. I want your shield. And then you'll have to come downtown."

WHEN Steve Craig began to think straight again, it was morning. They'd left him alone finally, and he had time to realize what they were thinking. They thought he'd planned the thing with Ed; thought he'd furnished the layout and the safe combination, and let Ed do the job. If he hadn't, then where was the diamond? And how had Ed known the safe combination?

The torn thousand-dollar bill had puzzled them, though. They couldn't

figure that. But then Steve couldn't either.

Sitting there on the bunk, he racked his brain, trying to figure where Ed could have got it. He fell asleep finally, and when he awoke, the day was nearly gone.

There were voices outside the cell. Del Cunningham waddled in and glared at him. Cunningham's loose-jowled face was red and greasy with sweat and he was mopping it with a huge handkerchief.

"You want to change that story, Stevie?" he asked, holding down some inner anger. "We might make it easy for—"

Steve shook his head.

"O.K., Steve. But we'll hang this on you yet. Now beat it!" The last words came out explosively, as though Cunningham had held them back as long as he could.

Steve stared at him.

"Get out," Cunningham repeated. "And thank your girl friend for getting Golden on the job for you." His pudgy finger leveled threateningly at Steve's chest. "But don't go too far away, Stevie. We've got nothing to hold you on now, but we will have soon."

He turned and stamped out of the cell.

Mechanically, Steve straightened his tie. He couldn't believe what he'd heard. How could Gail have got him a lawyer? Especially Golden? Golden was Jonathan Norton's private attorney. He wouldn't act without the old man's permission. And the last person old Norton would go to bat for was Steve Craig.

The early night air felt good on his face as he stepped out of the building. There was another guy enjoying the air too—a tall man in a trenchcoat and a soft felt hat that was pulled down over his eyes.

Steve started with recognition, but there was no answering look in the man's eyes. The guy brought his hands out of his trenchcoat pockets and pushed a stick of gum into his mouth.

He had on a pair of bright yellow pig-skin gloves.

Steve swung down the steps of the building and headed home. Two blocks from headquarters he happened to look back along the street. The guy with the yellow gloves was staring fixedly at a window display a hundred yards behind him.

That got Steve interested. He took five more glances over his shoulder before he reached the apartment. Yellow Gloves was right behind him each time.

Steve gave a mirthless chuckle, as he realized the guy must be a private dick working for the insurance company that had the policy on old Norton's diamond. That would account for his familiar face.

Gail was in the front room of his apartment waiting for him. She swept chestnut hair from her eyes as he came in.

"The door was open, Steve," she said, "so I came in to wait."

He tried to grin. "And after all these weeks of coaxing, you pick a time like this."

She didn't see anything funny. Her oval face was white and strained. He changed the subject quickly.

"Who had Golden spring me?"

"Uncle Jonathan. He wants me to bring you to him right away."

Steve started to break in, but she hurried on. "He realizes how badly we wanted to get married, Steve. He thinks that was why you did it. He wants to help you out of this, and then he'll set us on our feet with his money."

Steve grinned bitterly. "But he wants his diamond back first, huh?"

She nodded. "I tried to tell him you wouldn't have it, but he sent me to get you." She slid into her coat and headed for the door. "Talk to him, Steve. If you could convince him of the truth, he might keep Golden working for you."

IT WAS dark when they came out of the building. There was a cab idling at the curb. Steve steered Gail

toward it, letting his gaze wander up and down the street. Yellow Gloves was standing in an unlighted doorway twenty yards away.

The cab driver slid out of his seat and opened the door. Gail started to get in, then backed out.

"There's someone in here," she said over her shoulder.

"It's all right, miss. Just climb in," the driver said.

Steve grabbed her arm and glanced angrily at the hackman. "We're not anxious for company. We'll—"

He stopped. The cabby had a black-snouted automatic in his hand! "Just climb in," he repeated. "Both of you." He pushed the gun into Steve's ribs.

Steve clamped down on the impulse to take a chance with the guy. With Gail standing there, it was too dangerous. He pushed Gail into one of the folding seats and climbed in after her. There were two men inside, one in each corner of the rear seat. Each one had a gun in his lap.

The man nearest Steve was small, wiry, his face dark and amused under the brim of a black Homburg.

Steve grunted in startled recognition. "Joe Rinaldi."

Rinaldi was the boss of the outfit Ed had run around with for the last few years. Steve began to get a vague idea about why they had been picked up.

Rinaldi moved his neck inside his starched, white collar. "You know what we want, Steve. Hand over the diamond and you can get out here."

Steve said: "You're not the first party to ask me that, Joe. And I'm giving you the same answer I gave the others. I haven't got it."

Rinaldi leaned forward and spoke to the driver; then he swung back. "Ed was pretty close to us, and we knew pretty much what he was doing. For instance, we knew he was working on this job and we knew he wasn't the brains behind it. The cops could only go so far, Steve. But we don't stop till we get that diamond. See what I mean?"

Steve saw what he meant. Even without those jet-black eyes of his on Gail, Steve would have understood.

"Joe," he said wildly. "I tell you I haven't got it. The story I gave Cunningham was straight."

The man in the other corner of the seat tapped the driver's shoulder. "Step on it," he directed. "Looks like we're gonna have a picnic after all."

As the car sped forward, Steve squeezed Gail's arm reassuringly. But there was more confidence in the pressure of his hand than he felt. Then something happened that fired a spark of hope inside him.

The driver yelped startled words from the front seat: "Chief, somebody's tailin' us. That car's lights ain't gone out of my mirror for five minutes!"

Steve remembered Yellow Gloves. If that insurance dick were still trailing along, things might not be hopeless yet.

Rinaldi said easily, "Shake him off."

The cab gained speed, squealed around corners, careened down alleys; then suddenly they were back on the main stem again. They slid through the north end of town, passed Jonathan Norton's huge home, turned, and bounced for interminable minutes along a rocky country road.

They skidded to a stop finally, the headlights focused on the rambling ruin of an old farmhouse. Steve stole a glance back down the road as they filed up to the building. There wasn't a light in sight. The faint hope he'd nourished that the insurance dick had not been shaken died with him.

The lights were on bright inside the house, and Steve realized the windows must be boarded. There was one man inside waiting. Steve stiffened his shoulders as he followed Rinaldi in, ready for what he knew was coming.

THEN it came, swiftly and without any preliminaries. Five minutes after he stepped through the door he couldn't remember anything ex-

cept that Gail was there, helpless, watching him with horror-struck eyes; that if he gave out they'd start on her—unless he told them.

And he couldn't tell them, because he didn't know!

He came to suddenly to realize the blows had ceased—that Joe Rinaldi's black eyes were on Gail.

Steve shouted wildly, "I don't know where that stone is, Rinaldi. You've got to believe that. The only thing Ed told me was that the diamond was hot, and always would be. And it will. You'd never get rid of it."

Rinaldi laughed without taking his eyes off Gail. "Sure, it'll be hot. But not after we cut it into a half-dozen stones. Hey, you listenin'?"

Steve was gaping vacantly at the room, his eyes suddenly blank and far off. What was it Ed had said? "Norton'll never find it either. But he'll always be warm . . . Norton warm and the diamond hot."

Steve jerked his eyes back into focus suddenly. Rinaldi's open hand slashed out, knocked Gail out of her chair, and sent her sprawling to the floor.

Steve struggled in the grasp of the two men beside him.

Rinaldi exposed even white teeth in a grin. "We'll see how long you take to tell us now, Craig."

He bent, grasped Gail's wrists, and jerked her to her feet. They were all looking at her, but her eyes were fixed on something behind them. Her mouth dropped open and she screamed.

Then someone behind them said: "Gentlemen, shall we all submit peacefully?"

They all whirled. Yellow Gloves stood in the doorway, his fingers wrapped around a big automatic, his jaws working tirelessly on a wad of gum.

Steve thought, "Good old Yellow Gloves," and swung at the man nearest him.

Rinaldi's voice came harshly in the tense silence: "Nick Hartwell!"

Steve's fist hit the guy he'd swung at then, but there wasn't any power

behind it. He began to wish Yellow Gloves were miles away from there.

He wasn't any insurance dick. He was Nick Hartwell—killer! Steve had seen his face, not among the insurance operatives he'd met, but on a poster down at headquarters.

Hartwell's pistol crashed as Rinaldi pawed for his gun. The wiry little man jerked upright, his gun half out of his shoulder harness. Then he sagged.

The others were suddenly behind chairs, throwing hurried shots at Hartwell. Someone got to the lights and the room plunged into darkness. Steve leaped to the spot where Rinaldi had fallen. There was a sudden searing flame in his leg as a slug creased the flesh. He flattened, tore the gun from the little man's lifeless hand and crawled to Gail's side. She was crouching behind an overturned table holding a gun she'd picked up.

"Steve, get down. They'll kill you!"

"No, they won't," he said swiftly. "They won't shoot me. Not to kill, anyway. I know where the diamond is."

"Know?" she questioned suddenly.

He pulled her behind him without answering. "We've got to rush the door while Hartwell's busy with these guys. If anything happens, get into the fields outside. We're only a few miles from your uncle's home."

THEY moved toward the door, but Hartwell didn't stay busy long enough. There was a sharp gasp of pain from one of the three Rinaldi men who were left—then running footsteps toward the rear of the house.

Steve didn't wait any longer. On his feet, he headed for the doorway.

For a moment it looked as if they were going to make it. Then a flashlight snapped on in their faces. Steve sent a shot into the heart of the light and leaped forward. A smothered curse came from behind the light; then Steve plowed head-on into an unyielding figure.

Something burst inside his head. From far off he could hear Gail crying his name and his own voice shout-

ing: "Run. Get away from here!" Then the soft rubbery blackness reached up for him. . . .

He was lying on the ground outside the house when he came to. Hartwell was bending over him, his jaws still working on a wad of gum. Steve's head felt as though it had been used as a battering ram.

He moved and Hartwell bent closer, pulled him to his feet and shoved the end of an automatic into the small of his back. They moved down the road.

Steve began to feel better. Gail apparently had got away. She knew the country. It wouldn't take her twenty minutes to reach her uncle's big house and phone for help.

Hartwell had a car parked a quarter of a mile down the road. He prodded Steve into the front seat and behind the wheel, shoved a key into the ignition switch.

"O.K.," he directed. "You drive. I'll keep this thing in your ribs to remind you not to be funny."

He took off his gloves one at a time, and laid them beside him on the seat. Steve brought the motor to life and they bumped forward over the dirt road. When they reached the three-strip concrete highway he braked the car.

"Which way?"

"Right," Hartwell said, chuckling.

Steve laughed silently, forgetting the hot flame in his leg where the bullet had creased it. Hartwell must be crazy, heading back toward town when he knew Gail was loose.

They turned into the concrete highway and sped toward the city. The huge gates of Jonathan Norton's home loomed up suddenly. Hartwell pointed.

"In there," he said.

Bewildered, Steve swung the car around. They roared up the bluestone drive, braked, and skidded to a halt in front of the house.

Hartwell got out and waited. The yellow gloves were still on the seat. Automatically Steve picked them up. It wasn't till they'd reached the house that he knew why he'd brought them.

Jonathan Norton opened the huge oak door, almost as soon as they reached the steps. They went in and through the house to the library with its heavy leather-covered furniture, fireplace, and half-open French windows.

"Now, Steve," Norton purred. "There's no one in the house but the three of us. I want that diamond." He slid a big, old-fashioned wallet from the inner pocket of his coat and opened it. "I'm willing to pay enough to get you and Gail started. Five thousand, maybe?"

NORTON looked up questioningly with those watery eyes, his fingers flipping through the bills in the wallet. There were a lot of them in there, and as his fingers slid over the last one, Steve saw it wasn't a whole bill. Only half of one. The numerals in the corner read: 1000. And Steve was suddenly sure of himself.

He laughed. "Why should I tell you where it is, when I know I won't get out of here alive?"

Norton tried to look surprised.

Steve grimaced. "You hired Ed to steal that diamond. It would look better to the insurance company to have the maid surprise a real thief. Ed was to take the diamond, bring it back to you, and he'd collect the other half of that one-grand bill. You'd collect the insurance. And you'd still have your diamond.

"You figured I took the diamond from Ed, and you hired Hartwell to make sure Gail brought me to you after your lawyer got me out of jail. You were gonna get your stone; then Hartwell could get rid of us—Gail and me. You couldn't let either of us live, because we'd know you'd recovered your stone."

"But what about Nick here? And Ed? They'd have told."

"Not Nick. The police have too much on Nick. And as for Ed—you planted the maid to identify him. He'd have to take your thousand and clear out."

Steve stiffened in his chair, as a new thought struck him. "Ed didn't kill that cop," he cried. "You killed him. Ed was yellow. He didn't have the guts to kill anyone. You shot that cop after you'd joined in chasing Ed. You thought you'd hang murder on Ed, too."

The old man was grinning again. He'd slid a flat automatic from his pocket. "All very interesting. But now let's have the diamond."

Hartwell snapped: "The dame'll be here in a minute. Rinaldi was on his way to results when he started working on her."

They waited. Steve strained forward, hoping. Then the bell rang and his shoulders sagged.

Jonathan Norton slipped his gun into his pocket, got up and went out of the room. Steve heard him switching on the lights in the reception hall.

The sound of the big door opening came to Steve; and then the old man's voice: "Gail, my dear. What are you doing here?"

There weren't any more sounds then—until the door burst open and Jonathan Norton stepped into the room. Gail was behind him, the gun she'd had before clutched nervously in her hand.

From the corner of his eye Steve saw Hartwell shift his automatic. Hartwell wasn't being caught.

Steve lunged then, hit the gunman just as the gun roared. Hartwell went down. Steve grabbed his gun hand, twisted it, trying to tear the weapon from him. The gun spat wild bullets into the ceiling.

Somehow, Hartwell got his legs doubled and heaved upward. Steve went sailing backward toward the wall, his eyes fixed on the gun as it focused on his middle.

There was a sharp, ear-splitting crack from the doorway. A round, blue hole appeared instantly in Hartwell's face. He stiffened, then crumpled like an old accordion. His gun dropped to the floor.

Steve spun toward the doorway. Gail was there, her face white, her lower lip trembling, the gun still in her hand.

"I was so afraid I'd miss him," she whispered. "And so afraid I'd hit him."

Steve stumbled over to her and put an arm around her shoulders. Jonathan Norton lay on the floor, groaning. Hartwell's first bullet had missed Gail and got the old man in the shoulder.

"WHERE'S Norton's gun?" Steve asked.

Gail reached into the pocket of her coat and handed the weapon to him. "I took it away from him. I saw those gloves on the doorstep and saw through it—the way you wanted me to, I guess. So I went around to the windows here to listen. I knew then there wasn't time to get help." She paused, her brows coming down in a worried frown. "Oh, Steve, even if it's all true about Uncle Jonathan, how can you prove it?"

Steve Craig laughed grimly. "I think Uncle Jonathan's gonna confess," he said. "Especially when he gets that patrolman's murder pinned on him. You see, the maid will testify that this is the gun your uncle had

when he joined Belmont in the chase." He held out the flat automatic. "And the bullets from this will check with the one that killed Belmont."

She looked relieved. "Now, if we only knew where the diamond was."

He patted her shoulder and walked to the fireplace. It wasn't a real one; more of a fancy heat outlet. But, on the inside, the fake chimney went up for a foot or so. Steve's hand found a ledge, searched it, and settled on the square outlines of a jewel case. He got it down and handed it to Gail.

"It came to me when I told Rinaldi what Ed said," he murmured. "Ed said the diamond would always be hot, and your uncle would always be warm. When you think of it, it could only mean one thing—your uncle's fireplace. Ed must have lost his nerve and hid it up there, intending to get it when he came back to collect the other half of that bill."

Gail snapped the case open and the huge stone glittered up at them. Steve looked down at it. "The kind of a diamond I got in mind," he murmured, "isn't quite that big, but it means a lot more."

She'd turned to the telephone to call the police. But that stopped her. "I never liked big diamonds anyway," she said.



Memo from the Big House



By Richard L. Hobart

Johnny Dowst, ex-con, was fed up on that hick existence in a burg where nothing ever happened. For his magic fingers were doing the wrong kind of work. But when he tried some of his old-time hand wizardry, he found that once again he had put his fingerprints on the Big House door.

JOHNNY DOWST knew he was fighting a losing battle. He realized that fact three weeks or more before he discovered the dying man alongside the railroad track, and found the combination of the Riker jewelry store safe all written down on a piece of paper.

It was then that Johnny Dowst knew he was licked.

That past of his was too vivid, too hellishly strong to break away from. It had him in a cage of steel, clutched him with fingers of iron. The old days beckoned with ghostly hands, and there was a grimace of fiendish deviltry on the leering face of the specter of his past. Johnny Dowst knew he could not fight against ap-

paritions. That was expecting too much of a man of flesh and blood.

In those days he was known as "Slip" Dowst, and possessed a set of magic fingers that could open almost any "box" he came across. Of course, with so many of the newer safes in use, he couldn't do that now. But Johnny Dowst's long, slim fingers fairly ached to twirl the little bright knob again, see the arrow hesitate at number after number while his ear awaited the all but inaudible click which told of a tumbler falling into its slot.

It was terribly hot as Johnny trudged the dusty roadbed toward his still hotter job in the Westview laundry, three hundred yards farther

along the railroad right of way. Even though hardly eight o'clock, the day was starting off in the low nineties. It promised to be another real sizzler with no hint of rain.

Johnny Dowst had tried. He worked early and late in the steam laundry and by dint of his effort was made assistant to old Mr. Peterson, the owner. But he couldn't carry on much longer. He meant to locate an old style box here in Westview that promised to open quickly and easily under the urge of his magic fingers. After that he would be gone!

Johnny Dowst had tried because of Betty Maddox, the motherless daughter of Police Chief Amos Maddox. Betty was blonde, had trusting blue eyes and a cute spattering of freckles on her firm little chin. He was pretty sure he loved her.

It was because of Betty that Johnny had sat through meetings of the Westview Board of Trade. It bored him stiff at first, but after a while he found himself getting interested. A fellow should be interested in his city, Betty had said. People in Westview were slow in taking to newcomers.

The business men did not pay much attention to Johnny Dowst. They were courteous and, after nearly two years, he was appointed to an unimportant committee or two. Johnny worked hard on those committee duties and, although the chairman got the credit, practically everyone knew it was Johnny Dowst who had done the work.

Johnny Dowst was slowly becoming civic-minded now. It hurt that folks didn't pay much attention to him, but Johnny was unflagging in his zeal and devotion to the Board of Trade.

If he went back on "the road," it would be one thing he'd really miss. The speeches, the luncheons and gala dinners in the Odd Fellows' Hall. Johnny was looking forward to the big semi-annual meeting Saturday night when new officers and directors

were to be elected. Not that he was even nominated, but it meant a lively battle and a lot of cheering and good fellowship. That latter was something Johnny Dowst was beginning to understand.

It was then Johnny saw the dying man.

THE man was lying twenty feet from the tracks at the foot of the embankment, his body almost concealed under a tangle of wild honeysuckle. Johnny saw the man's ragged shoes first. He had to spread the honeysuckle vines wide to see the rest of him. Johnny Dowst, who had seen death and violence in many forms during a long career, caught his breath in utter horror.

The dying man was almost literally cut to pieces!

One arm hung by shreds, the right side of the man's chest was caved in. Cinders were ground into his face as if a rough grater had been rubbed over it, and one leg was mashed flat above the knee. Yet the injured man was still alive.

Even though the man's red-bearded face was raw and bloody, Johnny recognized him. It was as if a nebulous ghost of the far distant past had suddenly crystallized into substance. Three years of terrific striving for an upright life dropped like a bright mantle from the thin shoulders of Johnny Dowst, leaving the dark and ugly husk of the man of the past revealed: *Slip Dowst*.

It was not Johnny Dowst who quickly knelt amidst the perfumed honeysuckles. It was Slip Dowst.

The change was instantaneous, magically brought about by some strange alchemy of that first glance at the dying man before him. And as he gazed down at the battered man the transformation became complete. Gray eyes once round and clear became slitted, seemed set more closely in a face made thinner and more predatory because of taut muscles. Healthy and normal lips were drawn

back against hard-set teeth, making of his mouth a wolfish knife slash.

"Soup McGraw!"

Slip Dowst's words brought an answering response from the dying man. Soup McGraw's eyes opened, slowly and with obvious effort, and Slip saw the agony in them. The eyes were half glazed already and Slip knew life was fading from the terribly mangled body.

"Hiya—bo!" Soup McGraw whispered, recognition gleaming dully in his deep-set eyes. "Was looking you—up—Slip. Heard you—were here. Long time—no see! Had big job lined up—for us. Westview. Jewelry store box—Riker's place. Got combination from—factory man who got canned. He died—give it to me."

His swollen lips grimaced into a rueful smile. "No money—riding freight—went sleep—rolled off rods. Crawled here—dying—Slip—*dying!*" All at once a terrible fright flooded into his eyes and lay frozen there. Grimy, palsied fingers fumbled for Slip's hand and clutched hard.

Yes, Slip Dowst told himself, Soup McGraw was dying.

The dying man was silent for nearly a minute. Then his eyes opened wide as he tried to speak. The words were almost unintelligible because of the split, puffed lips. Slip Dowst bent low, his gray eyes avid and hard as he tried to hear the mumbled words.

"Wrote down—combination—piece of paper — in pocket." Spasms of pain coursed Soup McGraw's torn body and he moved jerkily. He tried to scream, but a smother of blood seeped from his pain-twisted lips. He mumbled: "Slip — you got your chance — be cinch for you. Jus' think of me — when you're — in clover!"

Soup McGraw's mashed body jerked spasmodically two or three times. Agony tightened his white face. Then the muscles relaxed. Soup McGraw, battered face more peaceful now, lay dead in the fragrant honeysuckle.

Slip Dowst's sly gray eyes were agate hard as he gazed down at the dead Soup McGraw. His heart was pounding, his breath coming fast. He felt no pity, only a wild and triumphant elation for the release offered him by the passing of Soup McGraw.

WITHOUT a tremor, Slip's long fingers delved into the dead man's pockets. There wasn't much in them—just a few old letters, some addresses, a sack of makings and crumpled cigarette papers, thirty-two cents in coins, a dirty rag and a paper packet of safety matches.

Searching frantically, Slip found the bit of paper on which was penciled the combination of the Riker jewelry store safe. It was in Soup McGraw's watch pocket along with a pawn ticket.

Slip Dowst's narrowed eyes glinted with cupidity as he looked at the numbers of the combination. He read:

Start 99
Left to 37
Right to 1
Left to 40
Right to 16
Left past 100
Stop on 57

Underneath the combination was written: *No inner door.*

Slip Dowst laughed softly to himself as he folded the bit of paper into a small square and placed it in his own watch pocket.

This was going to be simple. Slip flexed long slim fingers in avid anticipation. It was three long years since he'd tackled a box, but he knew there would be no difficulty.

Slip Dowst jerked around guiltily as he heard a metallic noise from up the railroad track. He knew what it was—a section gang on the way to repair the roadbed. Quickly stooping and gathering in the coins, Slip ran up the embankment. A quarter mile down the track he saw the handcar coming toward him. Slip stood in the

middle of the hot rails, raised his arms and yelled.

As the handcar came closer Slip recognized two of his friends among the section crew. He yelled, making the words sound excited, for it was necessary to impress the men that he had only that moment discovered the body. He pointed down the embankment as the handcar came to a stop a few yards away.

"A — a dead man!" he shrilled, gray eyes wide. "I was walking to work. Just happened to look down the embankment and saw the guy's feet sticking out from the honeysuckle. Must have been stealing a ride on the 6:31 freight and fell under the wheels. He's cut all to pieces." A cunning look came into Slip's eyes. "Just a tramp. Too — er — bad a guy can't settle down and — and work for a living like the rest of us."

As the four section workers nodded soberly Slip Dowst put slim fingers over his mouth to hide the grin. Did he have this bunch of hicks in Westview fooled! Only Police Chief Maddox knew of his probation. That was three years ago when a judge had recommended Slip be released from prison on probation provided he accepted the laundry job in Westview. It was while reporting to Chief Maddox that Slip had first met Betty.

It was the way the old police chief was fooled that tickled Slip Dowst. Why, the old man actually believed in him! That was a real laugh. Slip wondered what Chief Maddox would say after that Riker jewelry box had been rifled—

"What we gonna do, Johnny?" Jim Watson, one of the section men, asked slowly as they stood around the dead man. "We can't do anything for him, so guess we'd better lug the body on back—"

"That's against the law," Slip said quickly. "We got to bring Chief Maddox and the coroner out here. They got to look at him to see that he really was killed by the train, you know. Some of you boys ride on back to

Westview and get the coroner and Chief Maddox out here.

"Jim, you and Tom Land, wait here. I'm going with the handcar and drop off at the laundry. Don't want to be too late for work." Hiding his sly smirk, Slip Dowst climbed the embankment. He stepped to the handcar and started pumping one of the handles.

SLIP dropped off at the laundry, only fifteen minutes late. His story about the dead man made him the center of interest the rest of the morning. During the lunch hour he hurried to the police station to see Chief Maddox. The old man, with forty years of small-town police experience behind him, arched white eyebrows with his welcoming grin as Slip entered. His firm handclasp hurt Slip's thin fingers when they shook.

"Just wanted to know if there's anything I can do, chief," Slip said soberly. "Guess you'll want a sworn statement of some kind from me, won't you?"

"Yeah, Johnny, that'd be the law," Chief Maddox said, tanned gnarled fingers stroking the white stubble on his blunt chin. "The dead man sure was cut up by that train, wasn't he? Too bad. Name was McGraw—Soup McGraw. Found a couple—er—letters in his pocket. Had quite a record, too. Safe blower." His keen eyes studied Slip Dowst. "You — er — didn't know him, did you?"

"Know him?" Slip made his gray eyes widen. "Why, no, chief, never saw him before." He simulated a hurt look. "Chief, you — you don't think I'd have any truck with a yegg—now, do you?" Slip's gray eyes were downcast.

"Sure not, Johnny," Chief Maddox said heartily, slapping Slip Dowst on his thin shoulder. "I trust you, man! It's been a long time since I've thought of you as Slip Dowst! You're Johnny to all of us here in Westview. Folks are beginning to like you, Johnny. A heap. You taking in-

terest in the Board of Trade and all that. Won't be long before you'll be an old settler.

"Take Betty—" the face of Chief Maddox softened still more as he mentioned the name — "well, she thinks you're pretty swell. I ain't never told a soul about—about the old days, Johnny. I never will, either. You've earned your future—son."

After the business of the statement was typewritten and signed, Slip Dowst managed to get away without again shaking hands.

"The old buzzard!" Slip snarled to himself as he walked outside, wriggling the fingers of his right hand. "Here I am getting my fingers in shape for a big job and the old fool damn near crushes 'em!"

Slip Dowst was in an expansive mood as he hurried to the laundry. He took care to walk past the Riker jewelry store in order to get ahead on his task of casing the place. With the money he'd get from that safe he could go far. Even the sudden thought of Betty failed to affect him. He sneered. A small-town hick like the rest. She should see some of the dames in the night clubs and race tracks up East. Boy!

Slip's grin was slyly pleased as he stopped to light a cigarette across from the Riker store, his narrowed gray eyes busily engaged in looking things over. There was a soft drink stand nearby and Slip spent a nickel—one he had taken from Soup McGraw's pocket—for a bottle of pop. As he drank it his now keenly professional eyes took in a number of points of interest.

First of all, the entire two-story building was occupied by the jewelry store. On either side were story-and-a-half structures. Slip knew there was a narrow alley behind the stores, which would make it easy for him to work from the rear.

The Riker store was not very modern. It was equipped with rusty old-fashioned steel shutters which at night completely covered the front

display windows. But Slip knew the store carried a valuable stock of merchandise, for often he had seen expensive diamonds displayed in the windows. The haul should net him ten grand, Slip estimated, and the thought of so much money made him flush hot all over.

VISITING the downtown district during lunch and after working hours, Slip thoroughly cased the store by Saturday. That worked into his plans perfectly. The annual meeting of the Westview Board of Trade was scheduled for that Saturday night and Slip Dowst had it figured as his perfect alibi. He was pretty certain he could rob the Riker store inside of thirty minutes.

Slip knew the members of the Board of Trade would appear early and that it would be at least an hour before they sat down to dinner. He could show up early with the rest, be seen in various groups, and then disappear long enough to pull the job.

He knew, because of the crowd, he wouldn't be missed. Then, when he showed up again, the members would be able to swear—if it became necessary—that he had been there all the time!

Only two things worried Slip Dowst. One was how to hide the diamonds he planned taking; the other was his alibi over the weekend. Slip had it planned to be with somebody every minute from after the close of the Board of Trade meeting until going to work Monday morning. Then, with the discovery of the robbery on Monday, he would have a perfect alibi for every second of his time.

Just one thing remained to be accomplished now. That was to case the interior of the store again. Old Ab Riker, owner of the jewelry store, was one of the directors of the Board of Trade. It would be perfectly logical for Slip to drop in, ostensibly to talk, and case the place. Of course he had been in the store many times, but not within the past three weeks

since he had made up his mind that the old life was far better than this hick existence in a burg where nothing ever happened.

Slip Dowst squared his slim shoulders and turned in at Riker's jewelry store. There were but two customers in the store, one of them leaving as slip entered. Ab Riker looked up, smiled and nodded.

"Hello, Johnny," he greeted, "be with you in a minute." He turned back to his customer.

Slip Dowst grinned behind his hand. And as he pretended to be a bit bored with waiting, Slip's keen gray eyes were everywhere about the store. In the rear, he noted, a narrow wooden stairway led from the second floor. The door at the top of the stairs was also of wood, fastened with a Yale lock. It didn't look too hard.

The safe was one of the older model Monarchs, but would have been impossible to open even with Slip Dowst's magic fingers. But it was simple now that he had the combination. As the safe stood in the center of the floor, Slip was able to see that no wires led to it. That meant it was not wired to a burglar alarm. Slip unconsciously let his hand go to the pocket in which reposed the little square of paper on which was written the combination. This was going to be ridiculously simple.

A moment later Slip was talking to Ab Riker about the meeting of that night.

"You've been a loyal and efficient worker, Johnny," Ab Riker said proudly. He grinned. "You're about the most popular man in the Board of Trade now. You get along with folks. With a few more loyal old work horses like you this town'll go places!"

Slip Dowst started to sneer but caught himself in time. He almost forgot, because of the new feeling that had come over him, that he was a serious, work-horse type to these hick members of the Board of Trade. They were accustomed to seeing his

slow smile, his quiet good nature. Slip, making his lips smile as Johnny would have done, turned to leave.

THE jeweler called him back. "By the way, Johnny," he said, "I've got a bunch of laundry to send up to your place early Monday. Counter covers, curtains and the like." He pointed. "Better have 'em be careful because they're pretty old. Tell the driver to drop by for 'em about seven-thirty Monday morning, will you?"

"Sure, Mr. Riker," Slip nodded. "Tell the driver to bring 'em straight to me and—"

Suddenly, like a flash of lightning, an idea came into the sly and crafty brain of Slip Dowst.

His last problem was solved!

He had been worried about what to do with the diamonds. Should anything happen, and the diamonds be found in his possession over the weekend, it meant the end of everything. What to do with the stones until he had a chance to dispose of them had worried him. Now he could have the diamonds delivered to him! Sure, in the bundle of soiled laundry!

It was a stroke of genius. After the robbery it would be a simple matter to conceal the small package of jewels in the bundle of dirty counter covers and curtains. He would tell the driver to deliver that bundle to him. Then, with no one around, he could open it, take out the diamonds and hide them until he had planned a getaway.

Slip Dowst, talking and acting as he knew Mr. Riker would expect, painstakingly tied up the large bundle, tucking in the ends so nothing might fall out. Then, on a piece of paper, Slip wrote:

SPECIAL ATTENTION

Deliver to me without opening.

JOHNNY DOWST

Slip, only with an effort keeping the sneering contempt from his voice, explained to the jeweler.

"These things are pretty rotten with dust, but I can wash 'em in a net and they won't tear to pieces. I'll just put this note on the outside, see? You tell Joe Beggs, the driver, to handle this bundle carefully and deliver it right to me. I'll have 'em all back to you by Wednesday sure."

"Fine, Johnny. You know, Johnny, you're a very efficient young man. Taking all those pains for me with just cheap cheesecloth counter covers and scrim curtains shows you're a good business man. Maybe some day you'll own that laundry yourself. Lots of the boys here in town would like to see that. You ever speak to Sam Peterson about buying in with him? He's getting old, you know." Mr. Riker nodded sagely as he eyed Slip Dowst.

Slip almost said, "Nuts with a damn laundry!" but he caught himself.

"N-no," he said. "Hadn't thought of it. Takes money, you know, and I haven't got much."

"Well, Johnny, keep it in mind. Maybe I can—"

A customer entering the store claimed the jeweler's attention at that moment. Slip Dowst, grinning as he knew the jeweler would expect, waved and walked out.

On the sidewalk Slip sniffed in disgust. Own that damn Turkish bath place they called a laundry! Cripes! That meant swimming in sweat all day long. Sure, there was money in it, but who wanted to get tied down to a hick burg like Westview? Wait till he had those rocks in his pocket and was in the Big Town. Jeeze! Wine, women and plenty of song. Westview! He spat contemptuously into the gutter.

SLIP wasn't even blowing hard when he returned to the Board of Trade dinner after the robbery. It had been even more of a cinch than he had expected.

All Westview stores close early Saturday evening during the hot

weather. It was something Slip figured on, for he knew the downtown streets would be practically deserted—which they were. He managed to get into the jewelry store building from the roof of the adjoining building, going through a window which was easily jimmied.

The door at the head of the stairs was quickly opened merely by slipping his knife blade between the door edge and the framing and forcing the bolt. The steel shutters outside the display windows were in place, making it impossible for anyone outside to see in.

The old Monarch safe was as easily and quickly opened as a can of pork and beans.

After the door was opened, Slip had no difficulty finding the diamonds. They were in a little drawer by themselves, scores of them, and in a pasteboard box were a ruby, several small emeralds and a rather large pearl. It was a nice haul, Slip chortled, and worth fully the ten thousand dollars he had estimated.

Slip quickly relocked the safe and untied the bundle of dirty counter covers, still on the floor where he had left it several hours before. He placed the small package of jewels in the center of the bundle and tied it up again. Then he crept up the stairs and out the window to the adjoining roof.

The elapsed time Slip Dowst was away from the Odd Fellows Hall was exactly twenty-seven minutes. Sauntering in, Slip walked from group to group. He talked for a minute or two with each, then left for others. He could tell that he had not been missed and knew that in this throng of over two hundred there would be any number who would swear in court that he had been on hand all evening.

Slip laughed in triumph.

The bell rang for dinner and the crowd of men rushed for seats. The women hovered in the background, ready to serve. Slip Dowst's heart beat a bit faster when he saw Betty smiling at him. But inwardly he

sneered. Tie up to a country hick! Cripes, no!

He did not even notice that Betty had served him a plate piled higher than the others with country fried chicken, corn fritters and red ripe tomatoes. Slip settled down to eating, his mind on the big time he would be having soon with some blonde from the *Gaiety* line. . . .

Police Chief Amos Maddox reached his office earlier on Monday mornings, for there were reports to make out, papers to sign and the usual inspection of the city jail. The police chief had just signed the last of the papers when the telephone rang. The receiver lost in his big hand, Chief Maddox listened intently for several minutes. His usually tanned face was gray now and pain showed in his faded eyes. Finally he nodded and hung up the receiver. He sighed and his hand trembled as he ran blunt fingers through his white hair.

The police chief's mouth was taut, his broad chin set and hard as he reached into the desk drawer and brought out a shoulder holster and a well-worn Colt .45. He slowly took off his coat and strapped on the holster. Then he carefully inspected the gun before holstering it.

On the desk before him was a small picture in a silver frame. The face of the girl laughed out at him, a girl with wide, honest eyes and the hint of freckles on her chin. Chief Maddox couldn't look at it long; he turned it face down, for that picture of Betty made a lump come into his throat.

"Poor motherless kid!" he said softly, and there was a suspicious brightness in his faded eyes.

Chief Maddox straightened his shoulders and walked slowly toward his office door. As his gnarled hand reached for the knob he stopped, listening. From along the wide hallway outside he heard running feet. The door was thrust open in his face. He blinked and his lower jaw dropped in sheer surprise.

"Why — why, *Johnny Dowst!*" he faltered. "What in the name—"

Chief Maddox stared down into the thin, flushed face of Johnny Dowst upturned to his. Johnny's eyes were wide now — wide, straightforward and clear.

"I — I ran all the way — from the laundry, chief," Johnny Dowst gasped out. "I—I was pretty excited, I guess. Look!" His hand dived into a pocket of his coat and held out something before the staring eyes of the old police chief. "These—these diamonds must have been stolen from Riker's, chief! They — they were hidden in a bundle of laundry by the — the thief. It was a package Mr. Riker was sending to me for laundering. I —I tied it myself Saturday. When I opened it a while ago the—the jewels fell out!"

Johnny Dowst pressed the small package into Chief Maddox's hands. He flopped breathlessly into a chair, mopping his streaming face with a handkerchief.

CHIEF MADDOX said nothing. He looked briefly into the little package and blinked when he saw the shimmering jewels. Wordlessly he picked up the phone and called the Riker store.

Five minutes later the jeweler identified the jewels. Not one was missing. As he turned to go he nodded to Johnny Dowst.

"All I can say, Johnny, is thanks. You can count on me for the money when you want to buy the laundry. Old man Peterson, your boss, told me at the Board of Trade dinner the doctor had ordered him to live in Florida. He'd like to sell to you, Johnny. It won't take much. Go ahead and deal with him. I got some spare money laid away."

Riker grinned as he shook hands. "You can have what you need just on your own signature, Johnny." He walked out, the little packet of jewels in his hands.

"Johnny," Chief Maddox said

TSD

slowly, a bright light shining in his faded eyes, "that was a mighty honest thing to do, bringing back them diamonds you — ah — found. Yeah, guess the — er — thief must have been frightened. He hid the diamonds in the soiled laundry and — and then never had a chance to go back for 'em. You know, Johnny"—his face was very serious—"we *never* will find out who that thief was!" He sighed, shrugged. "Well, I'm not interested —now! Mr. Riker got back his jewels and — and the case is closed!"

"But—but, chief," Johnny Dowst stammered. "I want to tell you about—"

"It's closed, Johnny," Chief Maddox said gently. His sudden laugh was hearty. "Let's talk about something really important. Take Saturday night, for instance, I guess you was the most surprised man in Westview when the Board of Trade elected you first vice president, wasn't you? The boys railroaded that through and elected you by a rising vote. Every mother's son of 'em stood up!

"You were appointed chairman of the Law and Order committee, too! It's the most important committee of all, Johnny. It's paying you finally, Johnny, for how you've worked for Westview. I'm proud of you! You've made good in Westview, son, made good!"

Johnny Dowst was standing very straight. His face was lifted a bit as if he were staring toward some far horizon, a horizon where the sun always shone and it was bright and fair. There was a strange light shining in his clear gray eyes, eyes that right now couldn't see very well because it is so hard to see through tears. And as he gripped the hard

hand of the old police chief he said, very low, almost in a whisper:

"I — I think I'd better go tell Betty now. About the — the laundry!" He ran blindly from the office.

Police Chief Maddox's big thigh hit against the corner of the desk as he walked toward the safe. For some reason he couldn't see very well himself.

The police chief fumbled in a private drawer of the safe and finally brought out a worn sheet of paper. He adjusted his glasses and read what was written in that brief letter. It said:

Dere Soup McGraw:—

You'll find Slip Dowst down in a burg called Westview. It's a hick town if ever I seen one. Now you got the combinashun of that Riker box, you an Slip can go to town. Slip's the best man in the US with a box. Look me up when you and Slip come to Chi with them rooks. Luck, bo!

Jitter

A happy smile on his tanned face, the police chief struck a match. The flame wavered momentarily and then burned strong. Chief Maddox held the flame to a corner of the paper, watched it burn into black ash.

"No need of Johnny ever knowing I found this letter in Soup McGraw's pocket," he said in a whisper to himself. "Guess Johnny overlooked it when he—he got that combination of the Riker safe!"

Again there was moisture in the old man's eyes. He was thinking of Johnny Dowst, of how he looked there for a moment when he was staring off into space. It was as if suddenly a bright and shining mantle had slipped from nowhere onto Johnny's straight shoulders, a mantle that was far brighter than a million diamonds.



Crime in the

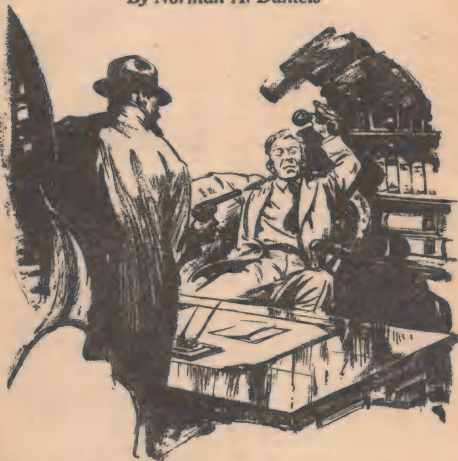


Sergeant Jim Jarvis was too hard-boiled to fall for any superstition gag. But he had to admit, when murder struck in that sinister museum, that the God of Vengeance had come down to earth to mete out doom—and collect corpses.

Wacks' Museum

Great Mystery Novelette

By Norman A. Daniels



CHAPTER I

MURDER IN STONE

THE watchman of the Post Private Museum was an old man, but a careful and conscientious man. His duty was to check the various rooms of this large museum, make duty calls which were registered at a private detective agency, and see to it that all doors and windows were securely bolted.

There was a reason for this. The museum was something of a hobby—named after Willard Post and maintained by four of his colleagues. All were wealthy and all possessed a gruesome desire to learn as much as possible of ancient relics concerned with torture and death. Some of the relics housed in this museum were priceless.

The watchman, whose name was John Gorman, had worked there for

years and knew every corner and shadow of the place. He especially disliked the Aztec Room. There were too many life-size statues; too many of those once blood-soaked sacrificial altars. He usually took time to brand his employers as wacks because they assembled these assorted horrors.

He entered the Aztec Room and, as usual, hurried toward the call box at the far end of it. Gorman glanced apprehensively at some of the huge stone gods. Halfway across the room he stopped and stared. There was a feeble light in the center of the room. It cast more shadows than light, but he noticed that something had changed.

The Aztec god known by some fantastic, unpronounceable name, was one of Gorman's pet hates. It was a weird thing, seated cross-legged upon a block of stone. Its hands were outstretched, palms cupped upwards as if in supplication. Usually those palms were empty, but there seemed to be some foreign object nestled in them now.

Gorman walked closer and gulped. The giant stone god seemed to be leering down at him. He stepped up to it, reached into his pocket and drew out a flashlight. Its beam centered on the cupped hands and the object they held. It seemed to be some kind of miniature statue. Gorman had never noticed that before.

He reached out and touched the thing. It was rounded and moved slightly. Gorman gave a low cry of surprise. It was a statue. A small, cleverly sculptured head. A man's head. What made Gorman gasp was the fact that the work was so carefully done that he instantly recognized the original of this stone head.

IT WAS an exact copy of the features of Felix Kent, one of the five men who maintained this museum. He brought the beam of his flash closer and tilted the head so that it rested on the neck. Gorman removed his cap, ran fingers through

his coarse grey hair and wondered why the devil anyone should have taken the pains to sculpture a head like this and then deliberately make a hole directly between the eyes.

He picked the thing up to study it at still closer range. That hole between the eyes was discolored. It seemed to have a small halo of red and inside this were darker marks.

"Why," Gorman said aloud and jumped at the sound of his own voice, "it looks like somebody shot the statue right through the head."

He knew the thing didn't belong there so he carried it with him and after putting in his duty call, walked slowly toward the office. Maybe he ought to tell someone about this; Felix Kent, most of all. Gorman sat down to think. Men like Felix Kent, and the others who owned this museum, were wealthy and important people. They had little time to fool around with such things as a report from their watchman.

What, Gorman asked himself, was the thing doing in the hands of that Aztec god anyhow? His mind clicked suddenly. His lower jaw dropped a notch and slow fear began to burn in his eyes.

The Aztec god's history was a peculiar one. Gorman knew all about most of the objects in the museum, but this god had the most terrible background of them all. Centuries before, it was worshiped by men who had advanced far beyond the civilization of their day. They regarded this stone image as the representative of vengeance. It was their court and jury.

When one of the tribe committed a crime, a small image of the malefactor was created, placed in the hands of this god and left there. If the man was guilty, he committed suicide. There was no escape. It was suicide—or the more terrible vengeance of the god.

Gorman jumped up and seized the telephone. His fingers shook so badly that he spent twice as much time as

necessary in finding Felix Kent's name in the phone book. Then he dialed. Almost instantly, the call was answered.

"Yes," the voice said, "this is Felix Kent."

"Mr. Kent—it's me. Gorman at the museum. You remember me?"

"Of course, Gorman. What's wrong? Why are you calling me at this hour?"

"I just found something and I don't like the looks of it, sir. In the hands of that big Aztec god. It was a small stone head and it—looks just like you, Mr. Kent. There's a bullet hole—"

"Gorman—are you sure? You've actually seen the head?"

"Yes, sir. I'm holding it in my hand right now. The bullet hole is—"

"Then it's finally come, has it? Perhaps I'm glad. I knew some day this would happen. I—"

"Mr. Kent," Gorman asked in a shaky voice. "Mr. Kent, are you still on the phone. Mr. Kent—"

Gorman suddenly gave a start of fear. Kent didn't answer, but a gun did. The explosion must have been very close to the phone because it all but blasted out Gorman's eardrums. He began screaming Kent's name and received no answer. The line was still open—he was positive of that. Over and over again he called Kent.

Then Gorman hung up for a second, raised the instrument and dialed the operator.

"Get me the police," he ordered. "Quick!"

Sergeant Jim Jarvis took the call when the headquarters operator finally pacified Gorman enough to understand him. Jarvis listened while the old watchman poured out his fantastic tale.

"And I think Mr. Kent shot himself. He sounded like he was going to do something desperate."

"I'll go over to Kent's place," Jarvis said. "I doubt there's anything to this, but just to make sure, you

stay right where you are. I'll be down shortly."

JARVIS hung up, jammed on his hat and patted a hip pocket to make sure his gun was there. He hurried to the garage, climbed into a detective cruiser and used the siren to clear traffic. He reached Kent's house, a large, lavish place.

Jarvis went through the gate and raced up the walk to the front door. While the watchman's story had sounded like a pipe dream, still there was enough substance to it so that Jarvis' nerves were tingling. He punched the doorbell and waited two or three minutes. No one came.

"Funny," he said. "A big house like this should have a lot of servants."

He tried again, and then took a long chance of getting into trouble. He kicked in a window, opened the latch and raised the shattered window high. He drew his gun, stepped into a well-lighted living room and remained silent for a moment. Not a sound reached his ears.

He searched the rooms on the lower floor, found nothing and he half sensed that the watchman's hunch would bear fruit. He ran up the massive staircase, reached the second floor and went through several of the rooms there. He paused before one closed door and sniffed. He'd smelled cordite before and there was plenty of it coming from behind that door. Jarvis' grip tightened on the gun he held. He turned the knob slowly, put the flat of one shoe against the panels and sent the door banging wide open.

There was a man in that room. He sat behind a big desk. His head and arms were outflung and blood was oozing across the papers on the desk. The telephone was off its cradle. The man held a heavy automatic in his right hand.

He was dead. Jarvis knew that without touching the corpse. The bullet had plowed right between the

eyes. Jarvis remembered what the watchman had said. The stone head had also carried what seemed to be a bullet hole. Jarvis backed out of the room, hunted for another telephone and called headquarters. Then he went downstairs until a radio car pulled up. He gave the two men explicit instructions to touch nothing. Then he ran to his own car, opened the siren wide and drove at a frantic pace toward the museum.

There was a small bell beside the heavy bronze doors of the museum and Jarvis rang this several times. During the seconds which elapsed, he felt a wave of apprehension come over him. Maybe the watchman was dead too.

Then bolts were drawn, the door opened a crack and he saw the watchman's chalky white face peering at him. Jarvis showed his badge and was instantly admitted. The watchman bolted the doors again and led him to the office. In the middle of the desk Jarvis saw that small stone head and gasped at its uncanny likeness. A trained, steady hand had carved this miniature. He stared at the perfectly created bullet hole between the eyes.

"My name is Gorman," the watchman said. "I—I found that—that thing in the hands of the Aztec god. It scared me. I recognized it, of course, so I phoned Mr. Kent right away. I heard a shot like I told you."

"Kent is dead," Jarvis said bluntly. "Now talk some sense. You found this small stone head in what?"

"The hands of the Aztec god. Honest—I'll show you. Sure it sounds crazy. Maybe it is. You'll think so when I tell you about the god. Come along, I'll explain on the way."

THEIR heels clicked against the smooth tiled floor and echoed and re-echoed. Jarvis got the idea a tomb might make the same sound when it was violated. He passed between a row of mummies, along an aisle composed of big stone blocks

that had once been sacrificial altars. Gorman kept talking all the time.

"The Aztec god was the punisher of evildoers. Somebody killed another man, or stole his wife or something, and the medicine men made a dummy that looked like the criminal. This was put in the hands of the god and left there. Pretty soon the criminal committed suicide. That always happened if he was guilty. If nothing occurred, then everybody knew he was innocent because the stone god wouldn't punish anyone unless he deserved it."

"Baloney," Jarvis grunted. "That sounds like something out of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Now exactly what did Kent say when you told him?"

"He just said he expected it to happen and he was almost glad it did. Then I heard the gun go off. I never know what to expect from the men who own this place. I think they're crazy. Long ago I dubbed this the Wacks' Museum. There—to your left. That's her—the biggest statue you see."

Jarvis turned the ray of his flash on the grim god and made a wry face. He had never seen anything quite so hideous. Gorman walked a little closer, but maintained a healthy distance between himself and the stone image. Gorman was getting jittery. One hand stretched out and he pointed at the cupped palms of the god.

"I found the stone head—right there in— L—look! Another one! Another stone head."

Jarvis whipped out a handkerchief, hurried up to the image and grasped the small stone head carefully so as not to smudge any possible fingerprints. He carried the object over beneath the single bulb and then slowly peeled away part of the handkerchief. He gave a visible start of horror. Gorman let out a bleat of alarm.

This stone head was also perfectly fashioned. Every detail of the man's

features was engraved in that stone—and there was a rope around the neck. A stone rope, but so faithfully duplicated that each strand seemed to be real.

"Who is it?" Jarvis barked.

"It—it's Mr.—Mr.—Collins. Lloyd Collins! Is that—that a—a rope?"

"Take me back to the office," Jarvis said crisply. "I can't find my way around this maze. Hurry, man! Run!"

Jarvis seized the phone book, turned pages and located Lloyd Collins' number. He dialed it and held the phone so tightly that his knuckles gleamed. Wild thoughts were surging through his head. Two minutes passed. There was no answer. Jarvis cradled the phone with a bang.

"Stay here," he told the watchman. "Something has happened to Collins."

CHAPTER II

THE SWINGING CORPSE

LLOYD COLLINS was a bachelor, living in an expensive suite at a big hotel. Jarvis sprinted up to the desk and identified himself. He demanded a key and the location of the Collins' suite. He commandeered an elevator, was taken to the twelfth floor and as he stepped out, he saw a tall man of about forty, standing by waiting for the lift.

Jarvis said, "Who were you looking for, Mister?"

The man shrugged. "A friend of mine, if it's any of your business."

"If your friend's name is Collins, it is my business."

The man seemed to be taken aback. "Why—how did you guess? I received a phone call from Collins a few minutes ago. He asked me to come here to see him. I did—but he must have forgotten the date because no one answers the bell."

"Come with me," Jarvis grunted. "I'm a detective."

He hurried up to the door, in-

serted the key and walked into the reception hall. He called Collins by name, received no response, and began inspecting rooms.

In the library he found what he fully expected. A man's corpse was dangling from a rope affixed to a light fixture in the middle of the room. At his feet lay an overturned chair. The dead man's hands were not bound. On a table was a decanter of whisky but no glass. Jarvis spotted that later on — smashed against a further wall.

"Good heavens!" the man with Jarvis gasped. "It's Collins."

Jarvis made a perfunctory examination. There was no pulse although the flesh was still warm. He turned to the man standing beside him.

"Just who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Walker. Guy Walker. I'm associated with Collins in several things. This is ghastly. Whatever made him do a thing like that? He was rich—in good health—"

"Were you associated with him in running a museum?" Jarvis demanded.

"Why—yes. The Post Private Museum. Five of us established the place because we have a mutual interest in studying ancient civilizations. The articles we have acquired are of great value. We allow the public to view them only on certain occasions."

"To cover the law which exempts public museums from paying taxes," Jarvis accused. "We've had other instances like that. Well, Mr. Walker, I'll give it to you cold. Felix Kent is also dead!"

"Kent—dead too? I can't believe it. What happened to him, officer?"

"Circumstances suggest that he shot himself, just as conditions indicate that Collins here hanged himself. I think it was murder in both instances. Walker, you claim that Collins phoned you? Can you prove it?"

"Why, no. No, I can't. I was at home, answered the phone personally. What are you getting at? How

do I know you're really a detective?"

Jarvis showed his badge. "Then I'm afraid you'll have to stick around, Mr. Walker. It's possible that you did see Collins. That you knew he was dead when I met you in the hallway. Now wait—I'm not saying you're guilty. Maybe we ought to make an image of you and put it in the palms of that Aztec god down at the museum."

"How did you know about that?" Walker sat down slowly, looked up and saw the dangling form of the dead man. He hastily shifted his chair so that he couldn't gaze at the grisly thing.

JARVIS reached into his pocket and took out the handkerchief-wrapped stone head. Before he exhibited the thing, he asked a significant question.

"Walker, you're pretty well known as a sculptor, aren't you?"

"Sculptor? Me?" Walker frowned. "You must have obtained your information from someone who doesn't know me. I can't even draw a triangle and make it look like one. What's this all about?"

Jarvis unveiled the stone head. Walker stared at it, jerked his head around and looked at the corpse. Then he went perfectly white and slumped deeper into the chair.

"I—I don't understand," he said in a plaintive voice.

Jarvis told him—every circumstance he knew. "Now, there were originally five men who owned the museum. Kent and Collins are dead. I've met you. Who are the other two?"

"Why—Willard Post, of course. He's president. Then there is Douglas Granville."

"Get on that phone," Jarvis ordered. "Call them and get them down to the museum. If they refuse to come, I'll send men to haul 'em down. They are to be there in twenty minutes."

Walker made the calls and

squelched the protests of each man by telling what had happened to Kent and Collins. Jarvis called for help then, waited until it arrived and told a headquarters squad to check very carefully for clues to murder. He took Walker by the arm and piloted him to the elevators.

They drove to the museum. Jarvis rang the bell again. Bolts slid back, the door opened and Jarvis pushed his way inside. Suddenly he realized that he had made a mistake. This wasn't Gorman who admitted them. The big door closed with a bang. Jarvis reached for his gun a split second too late.

He heard Walker cry out in fear. There was a thud. Somebody hit the floor and it must have been Walker because his cries were cut short. Jarvis tried to penetrate the darkness as he reached for his gun. Something hit him alongside the head. A vicious blow meant to smash his brains out if it landed properly.

He sank to both knees, half stunned. Reaching out, he grasped two legs and pulled hard. The man tried to free himself, but Jarvis clung fast. He suddenly let go, hurled himself to one side and rolled over a couple of times. During this activity he managed to draw his gun, but in the intense darkness there was no target.

He started to arise. The silence was broken by the jangle of a bell. Someone was at the door. Jarvis half turned around. He knew his feet scraped against the smooth floor.

That sound must have given away his location because the unseen killer came at him with a savage rush. Again that weapon, whatever it was, sailed down. Jarvis fired twice. Then the club slammed home, against the back of his head. He dropped flat.

Not entirely unconscious, he felt hands going through his pockets. He felt the stone head removed and then, vaguely, he heard a banging on the door and distant footsteps coming in his direction.

The lights were on when he came

out of it. Gorman, the old watchman, was huddled against the wall, livid with terror. Walker, sporting a blood-matted head, seemed to be quite active despite this, and there were two other men present.

They helped Jarvis to his feet and supported him as he tottered toward the office. The moment he saw the desk, memory returned with a rush and he looked for the first stone head. It was gone.

"The stone head—the one that looked like Felix Kent," he said weakly. "Gorman, it was on the desk when I left."

"I—I didn't touch it," Gorman quavered. "I swear I didn't, sir."

WALKER introduced the others. Willard Post was a stolidly built person with big shoulders and thick arms. Douglas Granville was somewhat different. Tall, thin and almost fragile looking.

"It sounds preposterous," Post snapped. Clearly, he was the type who gave orders and expected things to be done. "However, we know that Kent and Collins are dead. What I wish to find out is why they committed suicide?"

"How'd you know that?" Jarvis asked crisply.

Post fidgeted a bit. "Why—why Walker told us. While we were trying to bring you back to consciousness. I think that if we find the reason why they killed themselves, we'll have an answer to this whole affair."

"The answer—" Gorman moved forward a little—"is right in the Aztec Room. Yes, sir. It's that god! I found this on the floor beside Mr. Jarvis. It's a war club. It came from the Aztec Room."

He produced the weapon and Jarvis closed both eyes in a fervent prayer of thanks. If that hefty weapon had ever connected right, he'd be as dead as Kent and Collins. Then he glanced at Walker. The man was injured, but if the club had hit him hard enough to inflict that bloodstained gash, it

would have killed him or rendered him unconscious for hours.

Jarvis said, "Mr. Post—and you, Mr. Granville, how long were you outside the museum before you were admitted? And who let you in anyway?"

"I let them in," Gorman answered. "I heard the fight and then shots. The bell started ringing. I opened the door."

Granville said, "I arrived first. I knew Post was coming so I waited for him. He showed up about five minutes later and we rang the bell."

Jarvis surveyed the four men and realized that among them there must be a murderer. The idea of an Aztec statue, thousands of years old, being responsible for the deaths of two men had been absurd in his mind from the start. Now that he and Walker had been physically attacked, the Aztec god seemed more remote than ever as an actual killer. Also, stone images can't fashion stone heads of victims.

"Let's talk about this Aztec god," Jarvis suggested. "Who knows the most concerning that legend?"

"It's no legend," Post said. "Oh, I don't expect you to believe. I didn't either. Not for several years after we purchased the god. Then I began to wonder. The Aztecs, sergeant, were a clever race. They were not easily duped, and the histories we have uncovered indicate that they had a great respect for the justice and prowess of this idol."

Jarvis lit a cigarette and studied the four men for a moment. "Then, as I understand it, the god metes out justice to evildoers. Which means that Kent and Collins must have committed some crime. Both of those men were rich, honest by reputation, and certainly not the type to steal or murder."

"They were guilty of something," Granville put in, and his tall spare figure seemed thinner than ever. "If they weren't, both would still be alive."

Jarvis tried to think back. Were those legs he grabbed sturdy or skin-

ny? So far as he could recall, they'd been about average. He glanced at Walker. Perhaps he'd struck himself on the head with that club which he could easily have hidden somewhere near the door. But that didn't explain the identity of the person who had unbolted the door to let them in. Unless the watchman was in on it, too.

Jarvis arose. "We've got a job to be done, gentlemen. The man who assaulted me and Walker must still be in this building. Gorman, is there any other exit?"

"Yes, sir—a delivery entrance. It's at the back."

Jarvis nodded. "We'll search the place anyway on the chance that this killer didn't know about the rear door. Walker, you and Post take the east wing. Granville, you stay here where you can watch the front door. Gorman, we're going into the Aztec Room and have a little chat with your stone image."

CHAPTER III

THE THIRD HEAD

THEY took a full half hour to go through the place before all of them met in the Aztec Room. Post was beginning to show some signs of fear, but Granville seemed impassive as ever. Gorman was nearly frantic. Walker remained composed, but nervous.

Post said, "I went to the rear door. It was securely locked from inside. Nobody could have left and managed to get those bolts into place from outside the door."

"I'm positive no one went through the front," Granville added.

Jarvis shrugged. "It's beginning to look as though you're right about the powers of that idol, Mr. Post. We're sure nobody can be hiding inside here. We're just as sure no one left the place, so we're right back where we started from."

Walker said, "Let's search the place again. I'll admit there may be something to the history of the Aztec god,

but no ghost walloped me over the head. I'll swear to that. We didn't check supply closets too well. Someone may even be hiding in one of the mummy cases. It's obvious the man is still inside the building."

"A splendid idea," Post agreed. "I prefer that we handle this, sergeant. If we fail, then you may call in your police."

Jarvis got up. "There's nothing like making sure. Remember, gentlemen, this killer is desperate. Keep your eyes and ears open. I'm going to the rear exit and check on those bolts. The rest of you search every cranny. Better arm yourselves with some of these war clubs."

Jarvis watched them hurry away. Only Gorman stayed behind. Jarvis ordered him to remain near the Aztec Room and then the detective hurried toward the rear of the place and the delivery entrance which Post claimed was sealed up.

He studied the locks and bolts. They were intact. It was completely impossible for anyone to leave via this door and throw those bolts back into place. However, a smart killer might have seen to it that the bolts were withdrawn, secured entrance with a key and moved quietly toward the front door to attack Walker and Jarvis. Then, at a convenient moment later on, the killer could slip up to the rear exit and slide the bolts into place. That put the blame squarely on the shoulders of three men. Gorman, Post or Granville.

Jarvis wasn't forgetting Walker either. If he had done the attacking, and slapped himself on the head as an alibi, the rear door didn't have to be touched at all. Jarvis wondered why the two stone heads had been stolen. Perhaps because the killer feared his craftsmanship might be traced. Jarvis hadn't bothered to search the men. Those stone heads were bulky enough to show up in any pocket.

He searched several small rooms and closets without finding a thing. With a sigh of despair, he walked

slowly back to the Aztec Room. On his way he saw Granville prowling about. The man was easily recognizable in the semi-gloom because of his tall, lean figure.

Nobody was in the Aztec Room. Jarvis walked slowly toward the grim idol of the god of vengeance. Its cupped hands were still outthrust in supplication as if it were actually asking for more victims.

JARVIS frowned and wondered if there could be anything to the legend of this god. Sometimes, he knew, things happened which couldn't be explained. This might be one of them. He turned his flashlight on and sprayed the idol with its beam. The ray passed across those hands, hesitated and then returned. Jarvis let out a gasp. There was another head neatly placed inside the deep palms.

He lifted this out carefully, placed it on a showcase and studied the grim object. The features seemed to be drawn in lines of the most intense agony. Across the throat, the macabre artist had created a deep, ugly gash like that which a knife might have made. Jarvis recognized the face quickly enough. It was that of Douglas Granville!

Jarvis left the stone head on the exhibit case and started running. He called Granville's name and drew a response from everyone but the man he wanted to see. Willard Post, Guy Walker and Gorman, the watchman, came running in answer to Jarvis' alarm.

"Look for Granville," Jarvis ordered tersely. "I've found another stone head. Granville's! We've got to reach him quickly."

Jarvis recalled seeing Granville heading toward the rear of the place. His torch stabbing a path through the semi-gloom, Jarvis approached the spot where he'd seen the third victim and turned in the same direction which Granville had taken.

He found himself facing two doors leading into an office and a laboratory,

respectively. Jarvis picked the lab first, barged in and looked around for the light switch. There seemed to be none. Only several green-shaded lights hanging above the benches. He turned on two of these and slowly surveyed the room.

In a corner, propped against the wall, sat Granville. Blood covered his white shirt front. His face was the color of chalk. One outflung hand held a knife, stained with blood.

Jarvis knelt beside the man. He was dead. Granville hadn't lived more than three or four minutes after that blade had been drawn across his throat. Jarvis heard footsteps. He lowered his head until he seemed to be listening intently.

"You think you know? Man, you've got to talk fast."

Someone gave a cry of horror. It was Gorman, the watchman, who had stumbled into the room first. In a moment Post and Walker joined him. Jarvis straightened up slowly.

"He's dead, gentlemen. The idol seems to have won again. The idol—or whoever is taking advantage of its gruesome reputation. One thing I'm reasonably sure of—Granville did not commit suicide, no matter what the evidence before your eyes indicates. He was murdered, just as Kent and Collins were murdered."

"Did he—talk?" Walker asked in a strained voice.

"A little," Jarvis confessed. "I can't make much sense out of what he told me yet, but I will. Furthermore, I don't believe that stone idol had a thing to do with it."

"I do," Walker put in almost angrily. "Post does, too. Sergeant, if you had read the facts concerning that idol, you wouldn't be so positive. I maintain it has the power to make a man commit suicide. But the victim must have been guilty of something. We've got to find out what that is."

Jarvis gave a grunt of disbelief, walked out of the room and closed the door after the others had emerged. He walked briskly back to the Aztec

Room. On the way he spoke quietly.

"The murder of Granville, of course, means I must call in the men who take care of matters like this. First of all though, I want to see if that stone head of Granville is still around. I left it on an exhibit counter near the idol."

One minute later Jarvis groaned. The stone head was gone. Instantly, the three men near him made copious denials of even having entered the room. Jarvis started looking on the floor, under the showcases. His flashlight darted inside one case, rested there a moment and he tried to open the case. It was locked.

"How do I get into this case?" he asked quickly.

GORMAN had a bunch of keys and he selected one. It fitted the showcase lock and he pushed back the panel. Jarvis reached inside and picked up a piece of jade. A relic many thousands of years old. He stepped up to Post, whipped the man's pocket handkerchief out of his breast pocket and proceeded to rub the jade energetically.

He flashed his torch on it from an angle, grunted and spoke without looking up.

"Jade, when properly polished, gives an oily, resinous appearance," he said. "This doesn't. All the articles in that case are labeled genuine jade dug up in Aztec ruins. Something tells me you could dig up this kind of jade in a five and ten."

He deliberately dropped the small piece of green substance on the floor and ground his heel against it. The curio shattered. Jarvis picked up a couple of pieces and laid them on the counter.

"And there," he said, "I think we have the motive behind those killings. I'll bet a good part, if not all, of the jade in this museum is fake. Somebody who knew the stuff, knew every design of the articles, duplicated them in glass. I thought they looked too transparent when my light shone

from below them. Luckily, they were on glass counters and I could see through them."

Gorman gave a gasp. "Yes—yes, that explains it. This jade was dug up from the same ruins from which the great idol was discovered. Those jade objects are his property. Kent and Collins and Granville stole them. The idol took its vengeance."

"Do you believe that too?" Jarvis asked Post and Walker.

They nodded. Walker, emphatically. Post, a little more reluctantly.

Walker said, "There's no doubt but that Gorman is right. Sergeant, after this is over, I'll show you the literature assembled about the Aztecs and their gods. About this idol in particular. Then you'll believe too. This is one murder no detective is ever going to bring a criminal to account for. You can't electrocute a stone idol."

Jarvis advanced a few steps and looked at Walker with a quizzical expression.

"In the first place," he said, "this isn't one murder. It's three. And just how come you term even one death as a murder, when your phony legend has it that these men must have committed suicide?"

Walker's jaw dropped and for a moment he couldn't find words. When they did come, they were vehemently wild.

"You're accusing me. That's what you're doing. You think I killed Collins just before I met you in the hallway of his hotel. You've thought that right along, but you're wrong. Dead wrong! Furthermore, you're a fool not to believe in the idol. Post and I do. We're intelligent, sane men. No one can challenge the idol and get away with it. Kent, Collins and Granville stole the jade. It belonged to the idol. They died for it."

Jarvis let out a raucous laugh and pointed at the idol.

"I suppose if anybody planted a gun butt on the kisser of that hunk of stone, the guy would die, huh?"

"Yes, he would die, and by his own

hand. The idol would see to it. Jarvis, what are you going to do? Man—don't! Don't! It's like taking your own life."

Jarvis laughed again, stepped very close to the idol and placed both hands against it. With a hefty shove he toppled the thing over. It fell with a crash. Gorman uttered a moan of agony, as though he'd been thrown to the floor himself. Post said nothing, just stood there immobile. Walker began to rave about suing Jarvis.

The detective faced them, wiped his hands as if they were tainted and gave some orders.

"I'll show you what a phony that chunk of stone is. Now listen. First of all, I want an inventory made of the jade in this room. Valuables in other rooms, too. Later tonight, I'll see each one of you and I want a full accounting. Now I'm calling in homicide men to see if they can prove that Granville was murdered and no silly idol was responsible for his death."

CHAPTER IV

A DETECTIVE'S HEAD—IN STONE

SERGEANT JARVIS visited the police laboratories shortly after midnight. From the technicians there he acquired some small, interesting articles. He went to the homicide bureau and talked to the men who had investigated the three murders.

Captain Burke headed the squad and gave him only vague information. "The medical examiner says suicide, Jarvis. Yet even he recognizes that things aren't just right. No suicide notes, for instance. No methodical planning—and those dead men were methodical in business dealings. Felix Kent, for instance, had made plans to fly West to talk over some defense work with a manufacturer. Collins was thinking of accepting a government job. On the surface it's suicide, but I've got strong doubts."

"No stronger than mine," Jarvis grunted. "How about visitors to those

dead men? Who saw them last?"

"In Kent's case his servants were off for the night. Collins lived in a hotel and the staff took care of his quarters. Granville, of course, was at the museum. I don't know yet who saw them last. Got any ideas, Jarvis?"

"A couple," Jarvis admitted. "I'm going to put them to work. See you later."

He drove his cruiser around to Walker's home, found the man in. From him Jarvis received the information that a fortune in jade had been stolen from the museum.

"In addition," Walker went on, "there were a lot of Egyptian pieces missing too. All told, the loot must have been worth in the neighborhood of a quarter of a million dollars."

Jarvis whistled sharply. "Well, it establishes a motive. Maybe the three murdered men knew who took the stuff and were killed to insure their silence. Or, perhaps, the killer is only trying to pin the blame on them and establish their guilt by the use of that phony idol."

Walker wagged his head solemnly from side to side. "I wouldn't joke about that too much, sergeant. There are a lot of things the human mind doesn't understand. Personally, a hundred thousand dollars would not have induced me to push that idol over."

Jarvis chuckled. "I'd do it again for a dime. Well, just to satisfy myself, I'm going to spend the rest of the night inside the museum. See you in the morning."

"If you're still alive," Walker put in dismally.

Jarvis went to see Willard Post next. The financier was in his study and while Jarvis repeated Walker's story of the missing jade and curios, Post toyed with a pencil, and seemed nervous.

"So you're going to dare the wrath of the idol?" he said when Jarvis arose to go. "On your own head then, sergeant. I'm going to suggest that we get rid of the thing tomorrow. Sell it, give it away. Anything—except de-

stroy it. I'm not the kind to court trouble."

Old Gorman let Jarvis in at the museum. He was badly shaken by the events.

"I haven't rung one box since Granville has killed," he said. "The agency knows it. I wouldn't go into the Aztec Room either, if I was you."

"I don't intend to," Jarvis smiled. "I just came to keep you company. For our mutual protection, we'll stay in the office. If anything happens, we'll tackle it together."

SITTING down in a swivel chair, Jarvis tilted it back, drew his hat down over his eyes and proceeded to do some heavy thinking. Once he patted his pocket, in which reposed the articles loaned to him by the police labs. The time passed very slowly. It was almost five in the morning when a crash startled him and brought Gorman to his feet also.

"That noise—it came from the Aztec wing," Gorman gulped. "I—I think we ought to call for some help."

"Help, my eye," Jarvis grunted. "We'll go see what it was ourselves. Come on."

Jarvis drew his service pistol and kept his finger firmly pressed against the trigger. Gorman held to the rear as they approached the room over which the stone idol seemed to rule. It had been raised back on its pedestal, undamaged by the fall. Jarvis threw the beam of his flash all around and saw nothing.

Gorman summoned all his courage and approached the idol. He gave a bleat of alarm and hastily backed away. His hand pointed shakily, at the cupped palms of the stone god.

"There—there's another of them things," he croaked.

Jarvis slowly picked up the fourth stone head. He felt a shiver rush up and down his spine. The fear that struck him wasn't the same type he felt when facing an armed gunman. This was stronger, deadlier.

In his hand he held a stone image

of his own head. His own features. On the left temple was a bullet hole, created in a manner similar to that which had adorned Felix Kent's likeness.

Jarvis held the grisly thing at arm's length to study it from all angles. He grunted once and stuffed the thing into his pocket. His grin was a bit sickly when he turned to Gorman.

"Looks like the old Indian has me on his death list. Gorman, I can smell trouble brewing."

"It's death, that's what it is," Gorman mumbled. "I'm getting out of here. I don't care if I'm arrested for it. I'm going—right now."

He turned on his heel and ran full speed out of the room. Shortly after, Jarvis heard the big main door slam shut. He shivered. Being alone in here wasn't the pleasantest sensation in the world. He glanced at the impassive features of the stone idol and despite himself, eerie thoughts began surging through his mind.

He remembered the Pharaoh tombs of Egypt and the men who had excavated them. How some of them had died mysteriously. He thought of countless legends. Of old Mrs. Grogan who swore that when her husband died, she saw a phosphorescent glow rise from his corpse, linger a moment and then drift away into eternity.

Jarvis spun the cylinder of his service pistol and walked softly out of the room. Even his own light footsteps seemed to grow exceedingly loud in the tomblike silence of the museum.

Halfway to the office he paused and decided to examine the bolts on the rear door. This took him through the darkest portions of the building and there was a strong temptation to flood the place with light. That wouldn't do though—not if he hoped to have his plans materialize.

He reached the door and saw that the bolts were drawn. Whoever had placed that stone head in the Aztec Room, had entered by means of this

door. It also meant that the murderer must have had access to the door earlier in the evening, unless there was another entrance which Jarvis didn't know about. He decided to have a look.

THE windows offered no possibilities. They were all guarded by strong iron grillwork. It would take a blow torch to break through them. He passed along the main corridor, each shadow making his blood run colder. He half wished he'd never undertaken this crazy idea, but he was in it up to his neck now.

Making his way back to the long, dismal corridors of the museum, he could feel a cold clamminess overcoming him. There was the laboratory in which a man had died—with his throat gruesomely cut. In the utter silence, he could almost hear the man moaning.

The atmosphere tended to distort every shadow, every slight tapping sound. Jarvis knew a thousand places he'd rather be than right here. There was a row of mummies. Men and women dead for thousands upon thousands of years. The big sacrificial altars which had once dripped with blood.

He shivered and knew more than ever that any group of men who devoted such sums of money and so much time to assemble a museum of horrors like this, were certainly wacks.

Occasionally a shadow flitted across a wall. Reflections from cars on the street shining through the stained glass windows, Jarvis knew. Yet that knowledge did little to quell the fears rising slowly in his fancy. He was a hard-boiled detective, accustomed to ferreting out criminals. Invading their hideouts at the risk of being shot or knifed in the back, but that danger was small compared to the eerie influences of this tomblike place.

Jarvis no longer wondered why the old watchman had refused to remain here any longer. The place was enough to drive a man insane if he put in

night after night of patrolling it.

Then Jarvis stopped and forgot to breathe for a moment or two. From one wing, filled with replicas of the medieval years where torture was a fine art, came a very gentle tapping. This wasn't a building creak, nor even a sound made by mice—if any mice could exist in this grave above the ground.

It came again—as if in a series. Then Jarvis heard a slow, steady grinding noise as if some torture instrument, rusted over the centuries, was being put into operation again.

He drew out a gun, fanned back the trigger and felt more like making a straight line to the exit, than investigating the source of that sound. He moved forward very slowly, keeping well into the center of the wide corridor so that if an attack came, the murderer would be forced to cross a considerable amount of cleared area before he could land any kind of a fatal blow.

Jarvis wasn't greatly afraid of being shot in the back. That stone image, fashioned after his own likeness, indicated that the murderer would try to render him powerless at first. Then, with the police positive which Jarvis now gripped, the killer would fire a bullet through the detective's head. See to it that the wound would be in the identical spot where the hole had been fashioned in the image. The killer had so far aspired and reached perfection in his work. He'd keep up that tendency, Jarvis felt certain.

He reached the entrance to the wing and tried to penetrate the gloom there. It was impossible. He walked forward grimly, alert every instant for the slightest sound. There was always that gentle, tapping noise though. It seemed to come from one of the darkest corners of the wing—a corner made prominent by one of those iron maidens. A coffin with a spiked lid into which victims were crushed and pierced to death.

Maybe the creaking noise was the

lid of that iron maiden too. It certainly had sounded metallic. There was a long glass counter running down the center of the wing. Jarvis walked beside it, so close that he constantly brushed against it. That was a barrier of sorts, permitting him to concentrate upon other avenues of attack.

The tapping didn't grow any louder and for a moment Jarvis was almost certain another thumping noise had arisen. Then he realized it was his own heart. He smiled crookedly and without the vaguest semblance of mirth.

Ten more steps and he was fairly close to that darkened corner. He tightened his grip on the service pistol and repressed a shiver when he saw the huge iron maiden dimly outlined in the vague light. It was partially open.

Was there another victim inside? Jarvis had to know. Then he realized that the tapping sound had ceased. Only a silence that shrieked aloud, held sway.

Suddenly one of the shadows moved. Jarvis pointed his gun in that direction.

"Come out of there," he snapped, and his own voice seemed ten times louder than usual.

CHAPTER V

THE THIRD TRAP

THE shadowy object continued to move, as if swaying from side to side. Then there was a horrible crash and a suit of armor hit the marble floor. At the same instant, scurrying feet behind him announced his hunch hadn't been wrong. The killer was here.

Jarvis spun like a top, gun ready. The figure he saw this time moved with the speed of light and was already half out of the wing entrance before Jarvis saw it. His gun blared and the explosion echoed for a full minute.

He raced in pursuit of this killer who lurked in shadows. But that was dangerous, and anyway, Jarvis wanted to find out what had made that suit of armor crash.

He returned to the wing, lit matches and saw that a thin but strong piece of cord had been tied around one leg of the armor. A slight pull brought the thing off balance and sent it crashing.

"Smart guy," Jarvis mused. "While I was busy watching the suit of armor swaying, he hoped to sneak up behind me and finish his job. I was lucky this time. Next time—"

He shuddered and started a hunt for the man again. He'd disappeared in the direction of the room where the mummies were on display. Perhaps he'd passed through this and reached the Aztec Room. It was highly possible that the finish of this deadly game would be played there.

For a few moments, Jarvis considered putting on every light in the place, but realized that it would only make a perfect target of himself. The killer was hidden, probably knew the museum far better than he did, and was prepared to take advantage of that knowledge. Jarvis decided to let matters remain as they were now.

The sight of that shadowy figure moving away so rapidly had instilled a great deal more confidence in Jarvis. He was still on edge, but there was some satisfaction in knowing that the killer was just as frightened.

The row of mummy cases loomed up then, like rigid ghosts all out of proportion to their earthly shapes. Jarvis rounded a corner and paused. Directly ahead was a weird bluish light enveloping one of those mummies.

He chuckled. The killer must be desperate, trying to use another trap. The closer Jarvis approached that illuminated mummy case, the closer he was to deadly danger.

Yet, by exposing himself and still keeping constantly on guard, he might draw out the killer and get him. That was worth the risk. Jarvis was getting

tired of this cat-and-mouse chase.

Every sensory organ was attuned for trouble as he moved slowly toward the mummy case. He heard a scraping sound and stopped quickly. Then he saw two of the big mummy cases start toppling over. He gave a savage lurch forward and avoided them by inches.

They were cracked—ruined—by the fall. Jarvis looked around for signs of the killer rushing away from this spot, but he must have moved too fast. Covered up the sound of his own retreat in the racket made by the falling mummy cases.

Jarvis' trigger finger relaxed a bit. He found the cause of the weird blue light. A piece of colored cellophane had been draped over a tiny spotlight used to illuminate one display case. The killer must have trained the spot directly on that mummy.

Jarvis jerked erect. This time there was no denying that someone was at the far end of the museum—near the front entrance. The intruder's feet scraped across the floor as if he tried to hide any sound and couldn't because his feet were too heavy with fear.

PERHAPS this was just another trap. Jarvis didn't care. He tiptoed back toward the entrance, and this time he saw a shadowy figure clearly. Whoever it was, the man kept close to the wall and moved slowly and cautiously. Jarvis flattened himself just beyond an archway between two rooms. His gun was partly raised so he could draw down for quick, accurate shooting.

The intruder came closer and suddenly let out a wild yell of terror. Jarvis cursed because he saw the cause. There was one of those huge stained glass windows directly behind him. Car headlights must have flashed across it and emblazoned his shadow on the further wall.

Jarvis came out of his hiding place and sprinted after the man. He seemed in no mood to offer resistance. Jarvis got closer and suddenly went into a dive. He slid across the smooth marble

floor and one arm shot out to grasp the fleeing man's ankle. He came down with a crash.

Jarvis arose quickly, stepped close and aimed his gun.

"Get up," he snapped. "Keep your hands where I can see them. Oh—damn! What the devil are you doing here, Gorman?"

The watchman got up, nursing a sore kneecap. He was still shaking and wheezing so badly he couldn't talk for a couple of minutes. Finally he got it out.

"I—thought you were one of those—ghosts. Honest I did. I—I came back—felt I had to. This—is my job. I've never been scared before. Even if I kept telling myself the wacks who owned this place and all that's in it were bound to come to some unholy end."

"So you suddenly recovered enough courage to return," Jarvis grunted. "Gorman, you'll never know how close you were to being shot. Well, now that you're here, we'll both begin hunting, and I can tell you one thing."

"The Aztec god?" Gorman asked breathlessly. "Something else has happened?"

"Plenty has happened, but the Aztec god isn't responsible. The murderer is inside this museum now and I'm going to get him. I refuse to call for help because that killer is my meat. Come on—I think he went into the Aztec Room."

"I—I'd rather stay in the office," Gorman pleaded.

"As you wish—but you'll be no safer there. This killer moved around the place fast and he knows every cranny of it. I'd advise you to stay close to me."

"I will," Gorman drew himself erect. "I'll even help you grab that killer. Lead the way, sergeant."

They both walked slowly toward the Aztec Room. Within ten feet of it, they heard a slow, scraping noise. Gorman bit at his lower lip, seemed to summon courage from somewhere and

suddenly raced straight through the arched doorway.

Jarvis was only a few feet behind him. As Gorman entered the room, a huge fishing net, draped over the entrance, dropped on him. He let out a shriek and began to toss and twist in the folds of the web.

Jarvis just passed him, straight at a man who had arisen from behind one of the display cases and held a gun—ready to shoot it out in desperation. The trap meant for Jarvis had fallen on Gorman. The killer knew this and realized he, in turn, had been trapped.

A gun blasted and the bullet burned close to Jarvis' scalp. His own gun blazed and drew a howl of intense wrath. The killer fired again and missed because Jarvis was moving fast. The detective went into a lunge. He slid across the floor, and before the killer could back out of his way, he grabbed at his legs. With a mighty tug he pulled the man down.

The killer yelled curses, tried to bring his gun to bear, but Jarvis walloped him with the muzzle of his pistol. He took several vicious blows to the face and shook them off with an effort. Then his right hand secured a grasp around a warm, human throat. He straddled the struggling, cursing form and poised his gun above the man's head.

"Post," he warned, "if you make one move, so help me, I'll knock your brains out."

WILLARD POST gave a groan and went limp. Jarvis reached for handcuffs. Post began to squirm again and Jarvis let him have a lashing blow with the gun muzzle. The handcuffs clicked.

Jarvis got Gorman loose, hauled his prisoner to his feet, hustled him down the corridor and threw him into a chair. Then he used the phone.

Captain Furke, Walker and Gorman listened to his explanation with awed expressions.

Jarvis said, "I knew it was Post

the moment I saw that stone replica of my own face. Post needed money. He had several interests, but his main one was the running of vacation cruises. This was knocked out by the war. A lot of lucrative contracts fell by the way and he had to get cash to make good on other investments.

"The easiest method was to steal the jade and other very valuable items from his own museum. Post owned only a fifth interest so it was almost all profit. The stuff was probably insured, too. Being a clever artisan, he could change the appearance of the jade and sell it at a handsome profit. This museum has been tax free, but the city is cracking down on these private places. Very soon it would be taxed. I'll bet arrangements were already made to dispose of the stuff, so Post had to work fast. He hoped the blame would be pinned on these three victims.

"Post reached the museum long before Collins showed up, entered through the rear door which he'd arranged to open easily with a key he owned. He put the stone head in place, attacked Walker and me and then hurried back and met Collins at the door. Later, he took pains to reach the rear door first and slid the bolts home. Before he left—after Granville's murder—he fixed the door again so he could enter. I gave him the idea that Granville had talked, but that I wasn't sure of his dying words.

"I visited all three suspects before coming to the Aztec Room again, gave them a chance to get a good look at me and sculpture that head. I knew the killer would realize that I had to die. He hoped to make my death look like suicide induced by the stone idol, too. Just as he did the murders of his three victims, I even tempted fate by pushing the idol over.

"I knew whoever killed the three men must have been a trusted friend because in no instance was there a sign of a struggle. You may find that Collins, who was hanged, had been first dragged. Just in case things didn't go

right, he planted some suspicion on Walker by having him go to Collins' place right after the murder."

"But why didn't Mr. Kent tell me that Post was with him when I phoned?" Gorman asked.

Jarvis said, "Because I don't think Kent answered the phone. It was Post. Kent was probably dead then. Post set the stage by his phony dialogue. He knew everyone connected with the museum believed in the powers of the idol."

Captain Burke put a firm hand on Post's shoulder. The killer just slumped deeper in his chair.

"You mentioned," Burke reminded Jarvis, "the fact that you knew the murderer the moment you saw the stone image of your own head. How, sergeant?"

Jarvis grinned and dumped three articles on the desk. One was an aluminum device which made his nose look broader. Another was a waxy substance which fitted over his nose to make it longer and deceptively nar-

rower. The third device he clapped behind his ears and it made them stick out at an astonishing angle.

He explained, "When I saw Walker, my nose was very thin. When I visited Post, my ears stuck out. With Gorman, my nose was covered with the wax. I got those things from the police labs. I knew the murderer would study my features, make a sketch of them if possible, and then quickly cut my face into the stone. It's soft stuff and easily worked. Well—have a look, boys."

He drew the stone head from his pocket. The ears were extended at the precise angle to which the device brought them.

"I wrote down the name of the killer and the reason for my belief," he said. "I put the note in a drawer of this desk where it would be found in case—well—I didn't come back. Post is pretty smart with a sculptor's tools. I'm going to keep this stone head. It's the best souvenir I ever had of a murder case."

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County. I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do if there is poverty unrest,

unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 42, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Adv't. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

Rattlesnake Technique

By Vincent Hartnett

¶ Lefty the Dip, wise guy, figured it would be duck soup to roll that old gent. But Lefty did not realize that it's only one step from soup to stir. ¶



LEFTY the Dip slipped into the vacant seat next to the pink old gentleman with the pearl stickpin, and there were sunshine and music in his heart. On the city streets above the subway tracks, snow lay damp and chilling. But Lefty in imagination was already soaking up Miami sunshine.

Two pockets picked earlier in the evening had yielded about twenty-five dollars in cash. And Lefty, looking sidewise at the bulge in the old gent's breast pocket, knew that this fish was good for fifty dollars at least. Truly, luck was with him. Here was his trainfare to the South.

Best of all, the old gent was napping. Down would go the pink chin on the yellow tie, and then—as the cars bent round a curve—up would come the white head with a jerk. It was ideal.

Lefty's heart skipped. But he would not rush the job. Eight months in stir had once been the price of a rush job.

Down at the other end of the car, the subway guard leaned against the door and looked listlessly at the crowded car. "Dumb," thought Lefty.

Lefty planned what to do. Wait a few minutes until they came to a sharp turn. Then jostle the old gent, while his fingers snaked for the wallet. Slide it out of that breast pocket, up his own coat sleeve—ah, that was the technique! He smiled.

The old gent slumbered. Idly,

Lefty's eyes fluttered up to the car cards. Soup, macaroni, chewing gum—why didn't they have something new? Wait, what was this one?

"Strange But True," the heading ran. "Some snakes are poisonous enough to kill a man in less than twenty seconds." Lefty shivered. There was a dramatic picture of a rattlesnake, poised to sink inch-long fangs into an old man asleep in a lawn chair.

Lefty read on. "Pigs are immune to snake bite." There was another picture. One snake was biting a smaller one. He bent forward to read the smaller print. "One snake will sometimes strike and kill another snake."

LEFTY dragged his hypnotized eyes from the card. Why did they have to tell you creepy things like that? He shuddered—something had touched him on the shoulder. No, it was all right. Just the old gent's head.

Lefty stared at the man. It struck Lefty that he looked like the old gent in the picture—the one about to be bitten by the rattler. Lefty's mind played with the thought. Old gent—snake. Why, that would make him a snake! He was going to roll the old gent while he was asleep.

Car wheels clattered. Lights flickered. People went on reading tabloids. But then a funny thing happened—something that hadn't happened for twenty years.

Lefty the Dip, Lefty the wise guy, felt a pang of remorse. His conscience began to kick.

It was a funny feeling. It began in

the pit of his stomach. Then it wandered up into his throat, like indigestion. Like the lump in his throat when he first sneaked a quarter out of the teacher's purse in school. Lefty wriggled uneasily. This was a new one on him.

Concrete pillars made a gray blur outside the windows, then took on shape. They were at a station. Feet shuffled sleepily to the doors. Lefty's heart did a pole vault into his throat. Would the pink old gent get out? Lefty looked anxiously.

The wrinkled old eyelids half opened. The plump chin tried to rise. Then the old gent sucked in a deep breath, went back to sleep!

But what was this? The guard, a rawboned man with a tired face, was swaying toward them. And his eyes were boring into Lefty's. Lefty swallowed apprehensively, tensed himself to make a dash for it.

The guard planted big feet firmly in front of him. Lefty felt the hot blood rushing to his face, felt the two stolen wallets bulge like footballs in his hip pockets.

And then the guard reached down to the floor, turned a valve handle.

"Gotta keep the temperatoor legal," he explained. Lefty slumped back weakly.

Temperature—yes, it was a cold winter. Coldest in fifteen years, the papers said. And Florida was only a day's journey away! Lefty could see coconut palms and hibiscus flowers, feel the warm air from the Gulf bathe his face, see the swanky crowds promenading in front of the Roney Plaza.

And then his eyes flickered up to the car card, and he saw the old man and the snake.

Inside him, a small voice pleaded, "Let the old gent go, Lefty! Don't be a snake!"

But another little voice shrieked back, "Don't be a sucker, kid! Get what you can. That's what they all do!" Lefty shivered at the sound of

that nasty little voice. But he listened to it.

Opposite him, a tired laborer slumbered, chin cupped in his hand. A young fellow in a leather jacket chewed gum and read the ads. Nobody was watching. It was ideal.

Lefty gritted his teeth painfully, swallowed the last flickerings of conscience, crossed his hands on his chest, ready for work.

The car hurtled through the tunnel. Twelve blocks to the next station, Lefty knew. The red-faced guard stared out the window.

The rattle of the wheels became a roar. The cars pitched and swayed. The lights grew yellow, flickered. They were rounding a sharp curve. *Clickety, clickety, click* went the wheels. *Clackety, clackety, clack* rang the echo. Lefty's forehead broke out in sweat. It was *now, now, now!*

THE car lurched. The passengers swayed. Lefty tensed, leaned hard against the old gent, bent forward. Left hand under the coat lapel. Supple fingers sliding down to the breast pocket. Easy. Ah, they had it now. Fat. Easy. Lift it a few inches—now a lurch against the old gent. Ah, it was up his own sleeve. Lefty relaxed against the backrest. "Sorry," he muttered, "sorry to bump you."

But the old gent slept on peacefully. It was remarkable how he could sleep. And Lefty's heart sang. There was a train for Miami in two hours.

No need to rush away. Wait a few minutes. Slip out at a crowded station. Pay a nickel. Take an express train the other way. Easy.

There was a grunt by his side. Lefty's tired heart skipped a beat. The old gent was rousing himself, rousing like a hippopotamus coming up from the bottom of a lake. The thin eyelids struggled. Lefty was paralyzed.

But the watery blue eyes smiled apologetically at him. "Been napping," the old gent muttered. He thought a minute, reached inside his

coat. Out came a calling card and a stubby yellow pencil. He steadied the card on his knee, scratched at it with the pencil. His cupped left hand shielded the writing from Lefty's curious eyes.

Station lights flashed like meteors ahead. The air brakes hissed. Lefty put his hands on the seat, pushed himself unsteadily to his feet.

Hang! The old gent was getting out too! He struggled to rise. Somehow, Lefty found himself reaching out a hand. The watery blue eyes smiled gratitude. Lefty blinked quickly, then cursed himself under his breath.

He moved to the door. The old gent pressed after him. People jostled each other.

"Oh!" gasped the old man, and he fell heavily against Lefty. For a moment he sagged there. Lefty turned round, grasped the old gent's arm. "All right, pop?" he asked gruffly.

"All right, quite all right," the old gent nodded briskly.

"Queer old gent," thought Lefty. "He sure is grateful for things."

The old gent, suddenly spry for his years, was tripping up the stairway to the street. "Funny," thought Lefty.

"Funny how spry he is." The old gent disappeared.

Lefty made his way to the other side, southbound. At the turnstile he stopped, felt for a nickel. No go—he was out of change. No matter, he had three fat wallets in his pocket. He reached in a hip pocket.

And his hand found nothing there!

He slapped one pocket, then the other. Both empty! Terrible suspicions poured into his numbed brain. His hand streaked for the old gent's wallet in his breast pocket. He jerked the zipper. And he cursed.

Inside was only cut-up newspaper!

He reached for his watch. Gone! His lighter. Gone!

What was this, though? He drew a card from his pocket, a calling card with words scrawled on it. He spelled out the crabbed writing. "So sorry—but your technique is so old fashioned."

A car rumbled into the station. Feet slapped and pounded on the concrete. But Lefty, dazed, stared into space. And words, ugly words, beat into his ears:

"One snake will sometimes strike and kill another snake."



ARE YOU DOING YOUR SHARE? . . . BUY BONDS!

The Laughing Widow



★ ★ ★

Sam Criqui, private investigator, had taken a week-end jaunt to find out the lowdown on a play-boy's romantic maneuvers. But instead of getting a line on the pastimes of cafe society, he got a load of a setup that became a bullet binge.

★ ★ ★

By Edward James

IT WAS a tiny bungalow of rough, hewn logs, used as a swimming cottage. I gave them ten minutes and then I closed in. Very softly I turned the doorknob.

It was some night! A full moon shimmered over the silver lake. The sky was emblazoned with stars. A

night meant for romance. I thought of the girl with the copper hair back at the big house and all this time I was wasting.

She was all alone on a glider and here I was playing spy.

I yanked open the door of the swimming cottage and dished out a beam of light from my pocket torch. The man and the woman were standing in the center of the room and they had a half-Nelson on each other.

You couldn't blame Clayton Speer for kissing Diane Atwood Glynn. Given the opportunity, other things being equal, I would have relished that particular sport myself. Except it wasn't right.

Diane was married to Duke Glynn. Duke was the guy who'd brought me up here to join this week-end party and to find out what, if anything, was cooking between his wife and the veddy social Mr. Clayton Speer III.

From the looks of it, plenty was cooking between them. They jumped apart as if a firecracker had gone off at their feet, and they stood there, blinking into the flashlight. Diane muffled a gasp with the back of her hand. Over the hand her eyes were a wide, startled green. Speer flushed. His handsome face turned a ripe beet red and stayed that way.

He crossed the room and snapped on the light switch. Electric glare coned down. It was a nice room, furnished mostly with wicker stuff that wouldn't get spoiled from damp bathing suits.

I grinned at them.

Speer balled his fists and took a single threatening step forward. His voice was bellicose. "Well?"

I said; "Well!"

"What do you want?"

"Nothing—except to see what was going on."

"Well, you've seen. Now get the hell out of here."

"Soon," I said.

I WALKED over to the phone extension and rang the mansion. I connected with Duke Glynn. I told him to come down to the swimming cottage. I sat down and took a file and coolly began to round the edges of my nails.

A blaze flickered in Diane's jade eyes. Her voice took on a bitter edge. "I know. You're a private detective. A cheap snoop. Duke hired you to spy on us."

I looked at her.

"Almost right—except for the cheap part. Sam Criqui's services come high. You wouldn't call fifty dollars a day cheap. Or would you?"

She might at that. Diane had inherited a cool million fish from her maternal grandmother about a year ago and there was more coming when she got a little older.

Speer said grimly. "If you think we're going to stay here and have a scene you've got another think coming. Let's go, Diane."

I stood up in front of the door.

"Not yet. We have to wait for Duke."

Speer put Diane to one side and cocked his fists.

"You're asking for this, Criqui," he said and began to move forward.

I sighed and took out my Corpse Maker, which is the term I use for the Colt .45 which I carry in a shoulder sling. It is a very big weapon, but in my business I always say that when you need a gun you need one badly.

Speer stopped dead. He opened his fists and let them drop to his sides. He opened his mouth and let his jaw drop against the flowered foulard tie sported around his neck. Consternation spread around the edges of his face. I imagine it was the first time in his sheltered life he ever looked into the business end of a gun.

Behind him Diane gasped. Her face lost its color. Ordinarily, in polite company I don't like to take out the Corpse Maker, but I wasn't in the mood for a brawl with young Speer. And I had my orders. As long as Duke Glynn was

paying my expenses he could keep on giving them.

Speer and Diane dropped weakly onto a wicker settee and let their eyes pop at the gun. It had a sort of fascination for them. I rested it on my knees while we waited.

I thought about the redhead, Winnie Easton was her name, and the guy who'd brought her up here to Diane's summer place. And I wondered if there was anything between them. Frankly, I doubted it. Winnie was a sweet little kid who thrushed in a night club when she could get the work. Not much of a voice, a small lyric soprano, but on her it sounded good.

The reason I didn't think there was anything between her and the guy was his age. Roger Holloway was a New York lawyer who wouldn't see the short side of fifty again. Moreover, he didn't look the type. A short, plumpish specimen with an oily manner and bald shining skull as flat as a griddle iron.

I hoped Duke would arrive soon so that I could go back and join Winnie on the glider.

DUKE arrived before I had finished the wish. Just what made Diane marry him I don't know. In his own way he was good looking enough, tall, pale-faced, pale hair worn long above the ears. You know, the arty type. He had been an actor of sorts on Broadway, never a topnotcher, never a complete down-and-outer.

"Well, Criqui?" he asked in that affected mellifluous voice of his.

"A little cheating. Not much."

Speer jumped up. "See here—" he started, but Diane caught at his sleeve and stopped him. She stood up beside him and handed Duke a level look through her sea green orbs. Her crimson mouth was drawn and determined.

"Duke," she said without preamble, "this is the last straw. I want a divorce."

His pale brows hiked up. "You want

a divorce. My dear, I am the injured member of this family."

Speer said: "You don't love her and you never did. You only married her for her money. And when she'd had too much to drink. She was engaged to me and you knew it. Glynn, you're a skunk."

Duke shrugged. "Possibly. We'll not argue the point."

"What do you want?" demanded Speer. "Money? All right. Give Diane her freedom and she'll make a settlement on you."

Duke glanced at Diane. "Is that what you want?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Then it's what I want, too."

Speer said: "Holloway is a lawyer. You brought him up here, Duke. Let him draw the papers tonight."

"No." It popped out of Duke's mouth like a pistol shot. "Neither Holloway nor Winnie is to know anything about this. I want your lawyer to draw up the papers, Diane. Monday will be soon enough."

"Good enough," Speer snapped curtly. "Now if you'll order this hireling of yours to sheath his weapon and let us pass—"

"Okay, Criqui."

I stepped aside and they went out into the night. I looked at Duke Glynn.

"The job over?"

"Yes, but since there aren't any trains back until Monday you can stick around."

"Good enough," I said and made tracks back to the house.

Winnie Easton was still on the glider. The glider was on the side lawn facing a fish pool. I dropped down beside her.

She said: "Hello, Sam."

"Hello. Miss me?"

"Yes. Where have you been?"

"Night gardening," I said. "Digging dirt."

"You're a strange man. Do you always talk in riddles, Sam?"

"No." I was silent for a moment. The moon and the stars lit the countryside up pretty well. I could make

out Winnie's small, heart-shaped face and the full mouth that was soft and inviting. "How long have you known me?" I asked her.

"Well, I came up on Friday. You were already here. We met at dinner. It's Saturday night now. I've known you just a little over twenty-four hours."

"Do you like me?"

"Yes, Sam."

"Then I guess it's all right."

I LEANED over and kissed her. For a brief moment she started to melt and then she jerked away. I stared at her. She put out a hand and touched my shoulder sling. She stared at me.

"That's a gun, isn't it, Sam?"

"Yes."

"You—you're not a racketeer—"

"No."

"Then—why do—"

"I carry a gun? I'll confess, Winnie. I'm a sleuth."

Her blue eyes opened as wide as two silver dollars.

"You're kidding, Sam."

"Not at all."

"Are you out here on a job?"

I told her I was.

"How interesting. What is it?"

"That," I said, "is a confidential matter not to be discussed between myself and disinterested third parties. Besides, it's all wrapped up. The case is closed, so far as I'm concerned, anyway. From here on in I'm on my own. I have nothing to do until Monday morning except amuse you."

"You mean that, Sam?"

"Cross my heart."

She held out her hand.

"Then let me see the gun. I've always wanted to hold one, get the feel of it. They're such deadly fascinating things."

I took the Colt out of my shoulder sling, removed the clip and jacked out the chambered shells. I dropped the shells into my pocket and handed her the gun. She squealed like a kid with a toy, hefting it and aiming at the moon.

"Can I fire it?" she asked.

I grinned. "Sure. Go ahead."

She pointed the Corpse Maker in the general direction of Mars and squeezed the trigger.

An explosion split the night.

I swear I turned green as a grape. Not five seconds back I had emptied that gun. Winnie dropped it like a hot coin. We stared at each other.

It struck me almost immediately that the shot had come from the house. I grabbed up the Corpse Maker and sprinted toward the side patio. I burst through an open French window with Winnie hanging onto my coat tail.

We stood in the big central hallway. A butler was standing there, pop-eyed, staring at us. He looked like a statue in Madame Taussaud's wax museum. None of us spoke. Not a ripple of sound stirred in the entire household. It was enough to give you the meemies.

And then, suddenly, the silence was punctuated by a scream that bellowed through the place and filled it from wall to wall. The high-pitched, blood-chilling scream of a terrified woman.

I took the stairs three at a time, losing Winnie halfway up. At the landing Clayton Speer, III, and Duke Glynn were racing down the corridor toward an open door. I got there a second after them.

DIANE was backed up against the wall, biting her wrist and whimpering like a scared kitten. Her eyes were like twin jade marbles, wide and shining. It was a bedroom and on the bed was a man.

Roger Holloway was through with his legal career.

Good and through. The bullet had caught him in a disgusting spot, right through the right temple, and it had spilled his brains around so that his ordinarily ugly face looked even uglier. His lips had crawled back over his false teeth, exposing pale gums. His glazed eyes were bulging and hanging up toward a cut glass chandelier. One

arm hung over the side of the bed, chubby, well-manicured fingernails just missing the beige carpet.

An inch or so from the fingertips lay a gun. Not much of a gun, at least not in size. One of those Banker's Specials with a short barrel.

Diane screamed again. She kept on screaming.

I smacked her across the cheek. That did it nicely. She snapped her mouth shut, stared at me through shining, brittle eyes, then closed her eyelids very slowly, shuddered a few times and swayed gently to the floor. I caught her before she hit it.

Before we could revive her Winnie had come into the room, caught a glimpse of the corpse, moaned and passed out. I had the butler carry her to her room. When we had Diane sitting up I went to work.

"Were you here with him when it happened?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Tell me about it."

"I heard the shot. My room is next door. I came in here and saw him and screamed."

"Did you come right in?"

"No. The shot stunned me for a few moments."

I looked at Speer.

"Why did you wait so long before investigating?"

"Frankly, I didn't want to get mixed up in anything. I rather hoped it was Glynn who'd been the target. But when I heard Diane scream—"

I fixed him with a sharp look.

"One woman's scream is not so different from another's. How did you know it was Diane? It might have been Winnie, or one of the maids."

He sucked in his bottom lip. "I presumed it was Diane. I wasn't certain."

I turned to Duke Glynn.

"And you? What took you so long to get here after the shot?"

He stared at me blankly. "Are you competent to handle this thing, Criqui? Don't you think you ought to call the police?"

"Sure," I said, "I'll call them. I just wanted to get some evidence while it was still hot."

GLYNN hunched his tailored shoulders in a beautifully studied gesture. "What kind of evidence? The man committed suicide, that's plain enough."

"No," I said. "He was murdered."

Duke's mouth flapped open and he gulped audibly.

"Murdered! You're crazy. He shot himself. Anybody can see that."

"Anybody, yes," I agreed. "But not a man whose business it is to observe things. Look here. Holloway was shot through the right temple. But Holloway is left-handed. I noticed that while he was eating today. A very awkward way for a guy to bump himself. It's never happened before."

"Then somebody just tried to make it look like suicide?"

"Precisely."

"But why?" Duke Glynn asked, turning out his palms.

"So there wouldn't be an investigation. That's simple enough. If murder was clearly indicated the police would look for a motive, and the murderer wanted to keep his motive suppressed."

"That settles it." Duke's mouth was drawn back at the corners. "Holloway was my friend. I didn't know when I asked him up here that I was inviting him to his death. I'll call the local sheriff."

He turned on his heel and left.

I looked at Speer.

"Did you know Holloway before this week-end?"

He moistened his lips nervously. "No, I never saw him before in my life."

"And you?" I glanced at Diane.

She shook her head too quickly. Her face was white under the overcast of cosmetics. She didn't say anything. I wondered if it was because she didn't trust herself.

Duke Glynn returned a moment later.

"Listen," he broke out excitedly, "listen, Criqui, the line's dead. Somebody must've cut the wire."

I went down and tried to get a buzz out of the phone. It was as dead as a dollar watch run over by a trolley car. I said:

"Send the chauffeur to town and let him bring the sheriff back here."

Glynn rang for the butler and ordered him to fetch the chauffeur. Two minutes later the thin swarthy individual who'd met us at the railroad station appeared, holding his cap in his hand. His dark eyes were set too close together, his narrow-jawed face had a cold expressionless quality. Briefly, I did not like him worth a damn.

Duke said: "This is Mr. Criqui, Yager. He'll tell you what to do."

"Yes, sir."

"How far is it to the nearest town, Yager?" I asked.

"Fifteen miles." He spoke from the back of his nasal passage.

"Good. Take the car and drive to town and pick up the local sheriff and bring him back here. Tell him it's urgent, that a murder has been committed. If he has fingerprint equipment, let him bring it along. He'll know what else to do."

Yager's face remained deadpan. He didn't move.

"That'll be all, Yager," Duke said.

"Sorry, sir. I can't go."

Duke started to splutter. I was getting a little impatient. I cracked:

"What do you mean, you can't go?"

"Just that. I have less than a gallon of gas in the car and that boiler eats at least six a mile. The gas station is closed and they wouldn't sell me any more until Monday anyway. Our ration card is used up for the week."

I eyed him sharply for a moment.

"Do you know who's been killed, Yager?"

"Holloway."

"Did you hear the shot in the garage?"

"Was that what it was?" He smiled.

I DIDN'T like that smile—not one bit. I didn't, as a matter of fact, like anything about the man.

"How did you know it was Holloway?" I asked.

He rubbed the back of one hand with the fingers of the other. The smile stretched just a little.

"That's easy," he said softly.

"You're here, Criqui. So is Mr. Glynn. The butler called for me, and I saw Speer and Mrs. Glynn through the window just now. That leaves only Holloway so I guess he's the one that got smoked."

"How about Miss Easton?"

He shrugged. "I never thought of her."

"Did you know Holloway before this week end?"

"Never saw him before."

"You're in a bad spot, you know that, Yager."

"I don't know it."

I took out a green oblong slip of paper. It was a salary check made out to Yager and endorsed by him. I'd found it in Holloway's pocket when nobody'd been looking. I held it up before the chauffeur and let him see it.

The smile wiped away, leaving his mouth a thin gash.

"Where'd you get that?" he snapped.

"From Holloway's pocket."

"Then I am in a spot," he said.

"You want to tell me about it, Yager?"

Muscles ridged whitely along his bunched jaws. Suddenly his shoulders slumped loosely and he said:

"Why not? Holloway handled a case of mine five years ago. Maybe he didn't try hard enough and maybe the D. A. had it all tied up. Anyway they sent me up to Walla Walla. I'm out on parole now and Holloway knew that. He came up to my room this afternoon and saw a rod in the drawer. He threatened to turn me in. I gave him my salary and promised to give him more."

Duke Glynn made a nervous gesture.

"An ex-convict—working for me! You're fired, Yager."

The chauffeur gave him a look that needed a lightning rod.

I said: "Did you knock him off, Yager?"

"No, and you can't prove otherwise."

"Strangely enough," I said, "I believe you. If I find you didn't kill him I'll give you the check back. If the evidence points towards you, I'll turn it over to the county prosecutor."

"Fair enough."

Yager turned and strode out. Duke Glynn looked at me.

"Now what?"

"I don't know," I told him. "I'll have to sleep on it. In the morning we'll try to stop a car on the road and see if we can't get some law in."

Glynn thought that would be the best thing and we parted on that note. I got out a pocket flash and tried to trace the break in the telephone wire before I went to sleep. It was a hopeless job. If I was a monkey and could climb up and down the side of the building I might have found it.

I went up to my room. It was a big square chamber with heavy cross-beams on the ceiling. The bed was big enough for a herd of Indian elephants, comfortable, too. But I couldn't sleep.

A COUPLE of things troubled me. I hadn't figured Holloway for the kind of shyster who'd stoop to petty blackmail. Yet he certainly had been preying on Yager. Unless the automobile jockey was the slickest liar I've ever met. I wanted to know just exactly how Winnie Easton had come to be connected with him, why he'd brought her up here.

I liked that girl—liked her more than I care to admit. If I hadn't been stung once and taken a divorce rap from a little deb after two months of married life I would have been thinking a lot more seriously about Winnie. And that, my friend, after knowing her only two days.

I got up and put my robe on and

shuffled down the hall. A single light was burning at the end of the corridor and my shadow danced grotesquely on the floor ahead of me.

I stopped before Holloway's door for a moment and then slipped in. I turned on the bed lamp and light spread over his twisted face. It seemed to have shrunk a little since I last saw it. I prodded him with my finger. Rigor was setting in. I looked down at the floor and my heart gave one violent knock.

The Banker's Special was gone.

I dropped swiftly to my knees and looked under the bed, thinking somebody might accidentally have kicked it there. But they hadn't.

This was bad, plenty bad. There was a killer loose and he had a gun.

I left Holloway's room and continued down the hall to Winnie's door. I hated to wake her at this hour, but my mind was fresh and I wanted to get whatever information I could about Holloway before morning.

I lifted my hand to knock softly on her door and it faltered in mid-air.

At that instant something happened beyond the door. Perhaps it was tension, perhaps nerves, but I detected what I thought was the beginning of a cry that suddenly choked off at its birth and became a muffled gasp. Inside, someone stumbled. Or maybe it was the sound of a scuffle. At any rate, there was action and I suddenly wanted in as badly as I've wanted anything.

I grabbed the doorknob, twisted it and yanked. I almost pulled my wrist out of the socket. The door had been locked from the inside. Uneasiness transformed to a sort of panic that clutched my chest like a grappling hook. I realized that I was breathing heavily.

You don't think at times like that. You don't lay campaigns. I dropped back three steps and hit that door with my shoulder. The lock snapped, the jamb splintered, the center panel flew out, and I reeled inside.

There wasn't much light, only that

which came from the star-studded sky and moon, but it was enough.

A black shadow hulked over Winnie's bed. Hands were curled around her throat. Just a whisper of sound came from her mouth. Her eyes were popping and pain and fear had twisted her lovely face into an awful grimace. It took only a second, maybe less, to see all that.

My lunge carried me to within three paces of her assailant. He had whipped around and with the light behind him I could not see his face. Just a dark blur making a low, snarling animal noise.

And then I hit him.

MY FIST cracked against the bony point of his jaw and he snapped back like the recoil of a six-inch gun. The backs of his legs folded against the edge of the bed and he spilled over on the carpet. I was on him like a wild-cat. I don't know whether my rage was enough to kill him. If I'd known for certain that Winnie was dead I might have. At any rate I did intend to mark him up permanently.

But I hadn't reckoned on fear. A man surprised in the act of murder, a man fighting for his very life—the highest stake on this earth—is a triply strong opponent. And a wily one.

As I leaped upon him, his knees came up to his chest, the flats of his feet caught me squarely in the stomach, and he kicked up and out. I fairly sailed through the air. I walloped against the wall, using the back of my skull as a buffer. The blow lit up my own private Fourth of July celebration. For a moment every muscle in my body was paralyzed.

I saw him go. I saw him sprint out the door. And there wasn't one damned thing I could do about it. I remembered the Corpse Maker, but I couldn't get it out. I couldn't move even the fraction of an inch.

It passed swiftly. I floundered to my feet. I turned on the bed lamp.

Winnie blinked up at me and a weak smile tugged at her pale mouth. She

said, "Sam," in a soft voice that held infinite relief and a world of meaning.

I saw the cruel marks on her throat where the man's thumbs had bit into it. I said grimly: "Who was it, Winnie? Did you see him?"

She shook her head.

I got up and closed what was left of the door. I pulled up a chair and sat down beside the bed.

"We've got to thrash this thing out now, Winnie. There's a killer loose. No telling what he's liable to do before morning. Spill it."

"Spill what, Sam?"

I said patiently: "There's something you know, something nobody else does know, something about the killer. That's why he tried to get you out of the way. What is it?"

Her face was blank. She shook her head again. Was it possible that she herself did not realize the value of some fragment of information at her command? Had she seen something whose importance she did not appreciate?

I said: "How did you happen to come up here with Holloway? How well did you know the man?"

She shrugged slightly. "Not too well. He was my lawyer. He handled my contracts—oh, yes, and he got me my divorce."

"Divorce?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, from Duke, Didn't you know we'd been married? It lasted only a month. We realized almost immediately that it had been a mistake."

I just sat there and stared at her. The gears in my brain were revolving, but they weren't meshing properly. This was an example of what they called civilization. The ex-wife week-ends at the home of the current spouse.

THAT was a bitter pill, learning that Winnie had once been married to Duke Glynn, but after I'd swallowed it I forgot how bitter it was.

She went on: "Holloway called me and said he'd been invited out for the

week-end and that Duke had suggested bringing me along. I'd been working hard lately and he thought a few days in the country would do me good."

"Yeah," I said dryly. I thought: "Well, there's nothing secret about their having been married. Everybody probably knew that—except me."

I got up and rang for the butler. He came in tousled and somewhat sleep-swollen. I ordered him to fetch Yager. When he ushered the chauffeur in I told him to rouse the rest of the household and summon them here to a little powwow.

In the meantime I asked Yager: "Your gun, what kind was it?"

"A Banker's Special."

"Where is it now?"

He wet his lips and gave me a fishy look.

"Holloway took it."

I said: "Maybe you don't know, but Holloway was killed with a Banker's Special."

He didn't say anything. He stood there and watched me and he kept flexing his hands.

"Probably your gun," I added pointedly.

He moved back one step and started to turn when the others entered. Clayton Speer was fully dressed. Duke Glynn, attired in violet pajamas and

a Cantonese mandarin robe, was knuckling his eyes. Diane wore a silk robe, tightly wrapped around her.

I greeted them with the piece of information that to one of them was no news at all.

"A few minutes ago an attempt was made to kill Winnie Easton."

I kept a sharp look on their faces, but was unable to detect anything but surprise and shock. They just stared at her like a museum piece. Duke Glynn stepped forward, concern wrinkling his forehead.

"No! Winnie, who was it?"

She said she didn't know.

"I think I know," I told him.

He faced me and his eyes were wide and wondering. His pale hair was brushed flat against his well-shaped skull.

"Duke," I asked, "where did you marry Diane?"

"Just outside of Albany, I believe, wasn't it, darling?"

She nodded. She did not relish the term of endearment.

"With or without the court's permission, Duke?"

That question caught him totally unprepared. He stiffened, his whole body became as rigid as a plank. His face tightened, became darkly sullen.

"What do you mean, Criqui?"

"Just this." I had him then, I was



sure of it. "There's an obscure law in New York State that very few people know. When a man is divorced here he is not permitted to remarry in this state except by permission of the court after three years of exemplary conduct."

"What's that got to do with me?" His pale eyes had the brittle glitter of bits of wire.

"Plenty. You never got that permission from the court. Your marriage to Diane is null and void. Holloway was a lawyer. He knew that. He's been blackmailing you, threatening to destroy your little setup here unless you greased his palm. That's why you got me to come up here, to get some evidence against Diane, to force her into a cash settlement. With that in hand you could tell Holloway to whistle.

"But something went wrong. He wanted a big piece of money. He came up here this week end to get it, and he brought Winnie with him as a double threat. He probably threatened to sell out to Diane. And so you had to kill him. It's as simple as all that—"

DUKE GLYNN put the Banker's Special into his hand and faced us from the doorway. His mouth was thin, wrenched down at the corners, suddenly haggard.

"You're smart, Ciqui, too smart. But they'll never take me alive. They'll never sit me in the chair. Not Duke Glynn, they won't. I'm getting out of here. I'll blast the first one who tries to stop me."

He whirled and rushed down the stairs. I walked to the window and looked out. I saw him race down the flagstone walk. I had the big Colt in my fist. I drew a bead on his leg and calmly squeezed the trigger. He was beautifully outlined by the moon.

He jerked up short, his elbows went out and away from his body. He hit the walk full on his face and lay there, writhing and twisting with agony. A .45 slug tears an awful hole.

I told the butler to go out and get him.

He got only as far as the door. We heard another shot. It was the Banker's Special and Duke Glynn had made good his promise never to be taken.

Diane said woodenly: "He's dead, he's dead." She put her hands to her cheeks and started to laugh, that same hysterical laugh.

This time it was Speer who smacked her across the cheek. She shut up and just looked at him.

"But why did he try to kill me?" Winnie asked a half hour later.

We were sitting on the glider out on the terrace, waiting for daybreak. It was still a wonderfully bright night. We had decided that sleep was out of the question.

"Because Duke wasn't sure whether you were working with Holloway or not. When his suicide gag backfired and it showed up to have really been murder, he got scared. He was afraid you might give him away by spilling the blackmail story. So he had to get rid of you. He must have been nuts to think he could get away with it. But then all murderers are a little nuts, that's why they do it."

Winnie was silent for a moment.

"You're not angry with me, Sam, are you, for having been married to Duke?"

I grinned down at her.

"No," I said softly, "I was married once myself. We all make mistakes. I played the gentleman and let my wife get a divorce. That's how I happened to know about that remarrying law. The lawyer warned me about it."

"Does—does that mean you'll have to be a bachelor the rest of your life?"

I lifted her chin. "Not at all. I can get married in any other state. There are forty-seven of them, you know."

She said, "Oh," very softly.

"That's why we have a date in Connecticut tomorrow, Winnie."

She started to say, "Oh," again, but I put a stop to that.

Better Than Bullets

¶ *The killer thought he had a foolproof plan to get away with murder—until he understood a message from the grave.* ¶

By H. Q. Masur

I WATCHED Ned Oliver toss off his drink with a clumsy flourish. He had started with highballs and was finishing with Scotch, straight, no chasers. He hammered on the polished bar with a soft white fist and bawled: "Hah, you, barkeep, come hither and replenish yon tumbler, for I have the thirst of a desert wanderer long lost and a throat parched by the blazing sun."

Ned didn't always talk like that, only when he was in his cups. He turned a pair of bloodshot eyes upon me and his round flushed face had a bemused yet sly look.

"Drink up, Max, my friend," he said. "Let us tap this place until the barrel runs dry."

"You've had enough, Ned," I told him in a voice loud enough for the barman to hear. "Let's go home."

"Home!" His mouth stretched down as if the corners had been pulled by hooks and stubbornness held his body in a taut grip. He shook his head vigorously. "No, Max, let us stay. Let us tiddle the bottle. For alcohol is a wonderful remedy, it has the therapeutic quality of hypnotism. It erases the dark slate of a man's mind and drowns his sorrows in a wonderful sea of burning fire."

That was enough.

I slid off the stool and shook my head at the bartender who was uncorking a fresh bottle. I got an authoritative grip on Ned Oliver's arm and swung him to his feet.

"We're getting out of here."

Swift rebellion darkened his face

and he pulled free. "No, Max," he said.

I put my mouth close to his ear. "They cut the liquor here, boy. I know a better place."

That did it. He let the idea simmer through his brain and then he gave the bartender a withering glance, linked his arm in mine and together we marched out of there. His car was in a parking lot and I stuffed him into it and put myself behind the wheel. As soon as we hit the edge of town I pulled up behind a tree.

My coat pocket was bulging with the quart bottle. I took it out and held it against my closed lips, making believe I was drinking. Then I handed it to Ned. This time

I let him go as far as he liked. He coupled the bottle to his main intake and I heard a gurgling sound like that of a tub of water emptying through an open drain. He almost gagged on it. I let him hold onto the bottle and started the car.

AFTER a couple of minutes I heard him sob and I glanced at him through the corners of my eyes. His round moon face was shining with sweat and dampness glistened around his glazed pupils.

Soon he said: "This is my last party, Max, old friend."

"Why should this be your last party, Ned?" I asked in a syrupy voice, but a queer uneasiness had curdled inside my chest and I thought: *Is it possible he suspects? Can he know what I am going to do?*



He didn't, of course. He couldn't possibly. He was glancing fixedly through the windshield, and when he spoke his voice shook.

"You may not know this, Max, but I am going to die. He who lives by the sword must die by the sword. In Europe they might guillotine me, but we are more civilized here. They will simply sit me in a little room and drop a capsule, and when I breathe the lethal gas my mortal soul shall depart forever from my body. And that will be good, Max, for I shall have it coming to me. They will be right and I shall not fight them."

We almost hit a tree. I was so startled at the implications rampant in his speech that I found it difficult to drive. I gripped the wheel tightly.

"What are you talking about, Ned?"

"The gas chamber," he said. "That's what they give you here, isn't it, when a man commits murder."

I forced myself to breathe slowly. "And who are you going to kill, Ned?"

"Cherry." He said the name simply enough.

I settled back against the cushions. So Ned Oliver thought he was going to kill his wife. Well, he was mistaken. Cherry was not meant for death. That thought was inconceivable. Not Cherry with her intense dark eyes and dark throbbing beauty, with her soft lips that were a fuse exploding against a man's blood. My mind would never conjure a picture of her dead. Other people, yes, but not Cherry. I kept my mouth straight and I was glad that I had decided on today to carry out my plans.

He put his head back and tilted the bottle. I heard it click against his teeth and he muffled an oath. I reached up and fixed the rear vision mirror so that I could watch his face. It was stiff and wooden and he was having trouble getting the bottle between his lips. He succeeded after a few misses and took a long draught.

I said quietly: "You're kidding, Ned. You're not really going to kill Cherry."

"I am," he muttered, and his voice was getting thick. "You can just bet I am. I loved her, Max. Lord, how I loved that girl. But it doesn't take much to turn love into hate, you know that, Max. It doesn't take much. She's got another man, somebody she's been sneaking out to see when I work late. I found that out. And she doesn't let me touch her, Max—my own wife. She recoils from my caresses. She spurns me. Do you know what that can do to a man?"

He started to laugh. Only it wasn't really a laugh. I can't even describe it. Then he stopped.

"The joke's on the other man, isn't it, Max? He won't get her either, only the grave—"

"You're crazy," I broke in harshly. "Better take another drink."

He did. He almost emptied the bottle. I could smell the liquor and through the mirror I could see it slopping down the side of his jaw. Twilight deepened the shadows. I drove on. The brakes squealed a little as I turned into the driveway of his neat white house. A light was burning in the front room. I angled the car around to the back where the garage was and got out and opened the doors and then drove in.

I SAT there for a minute and looked at him. He was slumped down on the seat. His plump chin had fallen against his chest and the breath came hard and harsh through his nostrils. Ned Oliver was plastered all right. He was boiled.

The time had come and I thought: *What the hell, I'm not even scared.* They say that you can't get away with murder. Well, I was going to kill Ned Oliver and I was going to get away with it, clean as soap. No fancy tricks here. No bullets, no poisons, nothing to start the cops fretting.

Just a guy who drank too much and fell asleep in his car with the motor running.

I picked up the bottle and poured what was left on his clothes and left

the empty bottle in his lap. I made sure, though, that none of my fingerprints was on it. Then I slid out. The motor was making a soft purring noise. It would run for a pretty long time, all night, I guess, because the tank was about half full.

The garage doors worked on pulleys and I fixed it to look as if they had shut accidentally. A breeze would do that. I'd made sure of it before I decided on this little idea.

Carbon monoxide.

As effective as a .45 slug through a man's ticker and a whole lot more subtle.

I went into the house through the back door. Cherry was waiting for me in the kitchen.

"It's done," I said.

"Max, Max." She gave a little squeal and came into my arms. "Is he—is he—"

"Not yet. Soon."

She was trembling and it wasn't from fear. I held her close. She wasn't a large girl; she reached only to my chin. I put my mouth against her soft, dark hair. Her body was smooth, pliant, electric, to my touch. My head began to swim from her perfume.

It had been this way from that very first night at the Yacht Club dance when we found ourselves out of sight under the dock piling. That was when it had started.

I had kissed Cherry then and it knocked me with the impact of a demolition bomb. Her, too. She went for me, big. The sea spray was like a damp caress against our faces and she hung onto me. I kissed her again, hard.

She giggled, a short nervous sound, and looked up at me. "Max, I never thought you cared. And you Ned's friend all the time."

"I always liked you, Cherry," I said roughly.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

She stood up on her toes and her arms curled around my neck and her slender fingers played with my hair.

Call it what you like, magnetic at-

traction, chemistry, anything. I couldn't figure it out. I stopped trying after the first few days.

OF COURSE it couldn't go on like that forever. Ned was in the way. I had to get rid of him. It would have been easy enough just to run away, the two of us, Cherry and I, but then there was that little item of Ned's insurance. A twenty-five thousand dollar policy. Fully paid up. You can't sneeze at a stack of hay like that.

I spoke to Cherry about it. We looked at all the angles. That was part of our relationship, no pretense. Well, we decided to cash in on that policy.

That's why Ned Oliver was out in his car now, filling his lungs with carbon monoxide.

I unwound Cherry's arm from my neck, saying: "There'll be plenty of time later, honey. I've got to get out of here now. You got a good grip on yourself? You know what you've got to do."

She nodded and her dark eyes were wide and round. She went over to the tap and got a glass of water and took a small box of tablets from the cabinet and swallowed one. Cherry was subject to headaches. I had a suspicion she took those tablets because there was a drop of snow in them.

She came back and repeated my instructions. She knew what she had to do all right. She was letter perfect. In the morning, worried because Ned hadn't returned all night, she would go to the garage and discover his dead body. She would call the doctor, no cops, just the doctor. And he would do the rest.

I kissed her again and ducked out the kitchen door and walked a mile across the wooded fields where I caught a bus back to town. That night I slept like a rock.

Well, it worked out fine. Just like we planned.

The doctor called the police and the police called the coroner and he called it death by accidental means. The insurance company sent Cherry a check

for fifty thousand dollars, double indemnity because of the way Ned had passed away.

We gave Ned a nice funeral, nothing too elaborate. I was one of the pallbearers. Cherry put on a great show. And she looked wonderful in black. She kept moaning and wringing a little lace handkerchief for all the world as if her heart were breaking. I had to signal her not to overdo it.

We planted him in a lot out at the Easyrest Cemetery and ordered a headstone with the inscription: *Ned Oliver, Beloved Husband of Cherry. Rest in Peace.* I didn't drive her home. I didn't see her for a whole week.

And then I paid what was ostensibly a condolence call. After that I saw her more often. And in two months we were married.

I moved into the neat white house that Ned had built for his wife, and I settled down to keep Cherry amused.

MAYBE you think I got a bargain. You're wrong. Oh, Cherry loved me all right. It wasn't that. It was her health. She began to crack, to go to pieces. She lost weight. Her complexion got sallow. Her beautiful dark eyes lost their brilliant fire and got dull and heavy. The doctor couldn't understand it.

Me, I couldn't figure it out either. It wasn't her conscience; it wasn't remorse about Ned, nothing like that.

I was with her when it happened—when Cherry died. She went right before my eyes.

She was dressed in a silk house coat, listening to the radio. It started with a gentle shudder that shook her body. She must have known what was coming for she stared at me with an incredulous look in her frightened eyes and reached out her hands, crying, "Max, Max," in a thin, shocked voice.

Then she slid off the chair and rolled over on the floor. A spasm like epilepsy rippled through her violently and her fingers clutched at her breast as if to stop the horrible pain that was distorting her features.

There wasn't a thing I could do. I just sat there, transfixed, helpless, like a man caught in the grip of a nightmare—and I watched her suffer. It didn't take too long. One last final shudder that caught at her mouth like a hand and stretched into a deathlike grin that froze there, and she lay very still, her wide-eyed face drenched in a rosy pool of light from the lamp.

Cherry was dead. I knew that even before I stumbled to her side and felt her pulse. . . .

The rest of it is all somewhat hazy. I remember only parts of it. They come back to me even now, jerking me out of my sleep with a yell.

The police had to get the coroner to do an autopsy. I guess it was the way she died. And they found the arsenic in her stomach and traces of it in her liver and in the roots of her hair.

Chronic arsenic poisoning, it was.

It was in the headache tablets she'd been in the habit of taking. They found the box and they discovered the arsenic. They proved that I had bought some rat poison. I had, but not to kill Cherry with. I swear it. My fingerprints were on the box of tablets. Of course they were. Hadn't I brought her that box more than once?

The district attorney said that I had murdered Cherry to get the fifty thousand dollars she had inherited from Ned. He did more than just say it. He convinced a jury.

That's why I'm here now. In this death cell. Waiting for them to take me into that little room where they drop the capsule that releases the gas that takes all your troubles away. They'll have to drag me. I don't think I'll be able to walk it.

It's driving me mad—mad. I keep telling them, but it's like beating my head against the bars. Can't you see why? That's what Ned had been talking about that night when I left him in the garage, about killing Cherry. He did it. He put the arsenic in those tablets. He hated her. He wanted to see her suffer. He killed Cherry.

But nobody will believe me. . . .

Death Takes the Bus



By

J. Lane Linklater

¶ When Drake Judson took that bus ride to report a killing to the detective agency office, he found he was taking a cross-country route to a homicide homecoming. ¶

WINTER cold had settled all over Nevada that night. It hadn't passed up Las Vegas. Drake Judson was wearing a topcoat. It flapped loosely about his long legs as he turned into the hotel near the west end of the main stem.

For one as anxious as Drake to get out of town quickly and unobserved, it might have been better to have covered his close-cropped red hair with a hat. But he never wore hats.

He walked quickly into the motor coach office in the corner of the lobby, bought a ticket to Los Angeles and checked his suitcase. The bus was due to leave in fifteen minutes, at ten-thirty. It was already standing against the curb outside.

Drake Judson stepped out of the side door of the lobby. He was now around the corner from the bus, but could watch it through the hotel windows. Farther up the main stem, less

than five minutes' walk, was the Lucky Ball, one of the town's brightest gambling houses. Drake had been working there, his nimble finger twirling the little ball, his nimble eye watching, his nimble brain absorbing.

He would have been working there tonight, only this was his night off, which was lucky, because Joe Grail, manager of the Lucky Ball, was dead. Joe, with a bullet in him, was in a small private office, up over the back end of the building; not the regular office, but one Joe used on confidential occasions.

Drake Judson didn't mind Joe being dead, but he didn't want to be around when it was found out.

Ten twenty-nine. Through the hotel windows, Drake could see the passengers surging into the bus. He waited until the last one was on, then hurried around the corner. The lights heightened the pallor of his lean face and brightened the alertness of his blue eyes. He showed his ticket to the driver and ducked in.

The bus was fairly full. However, the bench along the back seemed vacant. Drake edged down the aisle to the back, dropped to the bench.

He started to get up again, changed his mind and merely shifted his position. He glanced down at the corner of the bench. He had sat on a small foot. A girl was lying on the bench, curled up, as if taking a nap. The foot was trim. The leg was silk-clad and shapely. The face which was turned up at him was well-formed. The lips, nicely turned, were just full enough. The eyes were brown and looked now as if short of sleep.

DRAKE whistled softly. "Meg Larkin! Well!" The bus was pulling away from the curb now. "So you wanted to get out of town without being seen!"

Meg Larkin made a grimace. She kept her position. "I was pretty careful," she admitted. "I got on while you were in the hotel."

The driver up front nicked a but-

ton. Lights went out. The bus was turning south, would soon be speeding through the country, up through the passes, down into California, across the desert. Drake peered at Meg. He thought perhaps he should have kept more of an eye on her. He had been tempted to, for purely personal reasons, but business came first.

Meg said nervously: "Don't stare at me like that."

Drake grinned. "Sorry. You're safe enough now—for a while. We're out of town. If you sit up you'll be more comfortable."

She swung to a sitting position. She was quite close to Drake. Her arm felt soft against him. She said: "You're a strange one. I didn't know you planned to leave."

"I didn't, either, until an hour ago."

She seemed calm now. "You never had me fooled."

"Ah! Meaning what?"

"That croupier job you had was just a blind."

"What made you think that?"

"Nothing definite. Maybe it was the way you kept your beautiful blue eyes busy. What's your game, anyway?"

Drake Judson's smile was disarming. His own story was simple, but he wasn't going to tell her that he was a private agency detective, and that his job in Las Vegas had really been to watch Joe Grail.

A bad one, Joe Grail. A mean oily fat little man with the cunning of three foxes. For years he had been associated with the big Hollywood gambling chief, Cy Knox. Just a few months ago Knox had built the Lucky Ball in Las Vegas and put Joe in to run it for him.

Drake didn't care about that. But Joe Grail had other affairs; side lines which were more profitable than his job as manager of the Lucky Ball. Indeed, he valued his job only because it gave him contacts which were useful and a door to hide behind.

His fanciest side line was blackmail.

A month ago, Drake, with the proper credentials, had come to Las Vegas

and got his job in the Lucky Ball. Shortly after that Mrs. Tim Wingate had arrived in town for the purpose of getting an easy Nevada divorce from the young Hollywood actor, Tim Wingate.

Mrs. Wingate's father, Jake Craftman, who himself was a big man of money in Hollywood, had never approved of her marrying an actor. He had arranged this divorce. Jake Craftman knew about Joe, and he knew that a young woman whose father was as rich as Jake would interest Joe Grail very much. So Drake Judson, ace man for the Paragon agency, had been planted where he could see what there was to see.

Drake's eyes were sharp-glinted, but his mouth smiled pleasantly. He said: "Don't waste time asking me questions. You're in a spot. Why not talk to me?"

Meg evaded with a pretty shrug. "Talk to you! Why? I don't know you. You worked in the Lucky Ball. So did I. We saw each other every day, but I still don't know you."

"You smiled at me."

"Just courtesy. You smiled first."

TURNING his head, Drake glanced through the darkened bus. The driver seemed to be the only live thing in it. The entire coach was drowsing. He turned back to Meg and his whisper whipped at her:

"What happened to Joe Grail?"

She whispered back at him fiercely: "It's none of my business what happened to him. And you can't scare me!"

"Did you see that note on Joe's table?"

Her voice quavered: "Note! What note?"

So she had seen the note! Drake said abruptly: "Tim Wingate showed up in Las Vegas a couple of days ago, didn't he?"

"Who?"

"You know who. Tim Wingate. He came up to see his wife, Elaine. He didn't want her to get that divorce."

"Why should I know about that?"

Drake chuckled. "Maybe you were just watching things—for Tim. Maybe you saw something and sent word to Hollywood, to Tim, and so he came fast to Las Vegas. Maybe it was that way. Anyway, Tim arrives—and tonight something happens to Joe Grail."

Meg smiled. "I understand that Mrs. Wingate's father, Jake Craftman, also came to Las Vegas, just yesterday. Maybe that had something to do with what happened to Joe."

Drake said: "That's not even good conversation."

Meg Larkin found a cigarette case in her purse. She offered one to Drake. He took it and politely offered her a light.

Then she said: "I'm too tired to talk, or fight."

"You might take a nap," suggested Drake, with a wry grin.

She sighed deeply. "Ah! I'd love that." And she put her head against his shoulder.

Maybe, Drake thought, she was faking. She was tired enough to go to sleep, but she didn't want to; maybe she didn't dare to. She closed her eyes and breathed, little irregular breaths. Presently the ridges in her breathing leveled off. It was like a rhythmic succession of gentle sighs. Drake muttered: "So baby's asleep! Poor kid! Hell, I must be getting soft."

The bus swept on. It didn't take long to reach the California line. Drake caught weird glimpses of desert country in the dark outside. It would be cold out there; warm and comfortable in the coach, but briskly cold in the high desert. He removed his topcoat without disturbing Meg and flung it in the corner.

The first stop would be Baker, about one o'clock.

But the coach didn't wait until reaching Baker. It was slowing now, swinging in toward a little group of lights. Drake knew this road, knew every spot on it. This was Yucca

Grove, just a store, a garage and a few cabins.

Perhaps someone from Las Vegas was getting off here, some prospector, maybe. But Drake was quickly alert.

The bus stopped. No one was getting off. It was, instead, someone getting on, someone who had signaled the stage.

Drake watched the man get on, and stiffened. The man was medium-sized, compact. His soft hat was pulled tight over his eyes. Drake couldn't see the eyes, but he had looked into them more than once, gray eyes in which there was no warmth.

The driver did not turn on the lights. The man felt his way into the aisle, dropped into the nearest vacant seat. The coach was in motion again.

Regretfully, Drake shook the girl. She woke up, startled.

"Oh," she said. "Sorry. I hadn't intended—"

DRAKE put a finger over her lips, vertically. He said quietly: "The bus just stopped at Yucca Grove to pick up a passenger. Bet you can't guess who."

"No. Who?"

"Joe Grail's boss, the owner of the Lucky Ball, Cy Knox!"

Meg was wide awake at once. "Cy Knox!"

"He's in that aisle seat, third from the front."

She peered through the dusk. "Cy Knox!" she murmured. "This is over two hundred miles from Los Angeles, and over seventy from Las Vegas. What is he doing here?"

"Maybe nothing." Drake bent closer. "Listen. Soon we'll be at Baker. The bus will stop there for thirty minutes. Everyone will get out. You won't be able to hide. So why not talk?"

Meg said quickly: "Okay. Listen. I was representing Tim Wingate—you were right about that. Tim's been busy working on a picture in Hollywood. He didn't want Elaine to get a divorce. He knew Elaine wasn't crazy

about it either, but her father's been working hard for it."

"I know that. I've been working for the old man."

"Then I shouldn't be talking to you. Only I've got to. Tim got tipped off that Joe Grail might try something on Elaine. So he hired me to go there and have a look-see."

Drake said: "We were both on the same job, but with different bosses. But somehow it comes to me that you saw more than I."

"Maybe I did."

"What?"

"Well, you know Elaine. Very pretty and a nice gal, but not too bright."

"That describes her."

"So it was easy for Joe. Elaine has sympathy—too much. I don't know where she got it, certainly not from her old man. So Joe gets a guy named Fred Lausen to contact her. Lausen was supposed to be a young fellow from a fine old Eastern family who had had a run of bad luck, down to nothing."

"Elaine was compromised, eh?" queried Drake.

"Badly. It was all 'way over her head. This Lausen is a good-looking chap. Pretended he only wanted a little help on some educational business. He stuck pretty close to Elaine for a couple of weeks, then it was easy for him to get her alone in her rooms. That was three nights ago. A hard-looking gal busted in on them—with witnesses. Claimed to be Lausen's wife."

"Well?"

"She was. Mrs. Lausen in the flesh. Not bad-looking flesh, either."

Drake wagged his head. "So it's alienation of affections."

"Right. She wants a hundred grand!"

Drake said: "Oh."

"Well," said Meg, "it's worth it. Lausen is a bad one. He has a record. Imagine how it would look to have Mrs. Timothy Wingate hauled into court, because of that no-good customer. Man, that's big stuff!"

Drake was mildly accusing. "You did see more than I."

"You were watching Joe Grail. I was watching the gal."

"So then you sent for Tim?"

"Phoned him long distance. He drove up the night before last. Last night he was going to try to see Joe Grail, privately."

"Did he?"

Meg thought a moment, temporized. Then she said, "I don't know. I haven't seen him since. Earlier in the evening I was in the Lucky Ball and Joe passed me. He stopped and asked me to come up later and see him in his extra special private office." Meg drew a long breath. "I did. He was alone. And he was dead. I didn't stay around."

"So that's the whole truth?" Drake said skeptically.

"Well, *you* haven't told *me* a darn thing. Now, I—ah!"

Her whisper sank into nothing. She gazed down the aisle of the coach. Drake was already looking. Cy Knox had arisen from his seat, was turning back into the aisle.

Drake muttered: "This is the smoking section. He's coming back here."

CY KNOX moved cautiously toward them. He still had his hat on, pulled down tight. He always wore the hat. Some thought it might have been because of his face and head. His eyes were strangely vacant, his head sloped back queerly; but if you couldn't see his eyes and the top of his head, he looked handsome. It seemed to Drake that the hat, usually immaculate, was smudged around the hatband.

Knox saw Drake and Meg at once. He took off his topcoat, sat down next to Drake and said: "Well, two of my own people, eh? It's a surprise!"

There was no surprise in his voice or face, though. Knox never mixed with the people who worked in his places, but he knew them all. Drake and Meg watched him as his hand

passed into his coat and came out again, rapidly. He had a cigar now. It was like a bit of magic, a way Knox had of doing things.

Drake said: "We're just making a quick trip to Los Angeles, Mr. Knox. On the quiet. Be back in Las Vegas in a few days."

Cy Knox lit the cigar and blew smoke. "Romance, eh?" he said. "Well, that's out of my line." He blew more smoke, slowly. "I had a little ear trouble," he went on. "I've been down in Los Angeles for a month, and was just driving back up to Vegas. My engine went bad, but I managed to pull into Yucca Grove. Thought if I took this bus back to Baker, I could pick up another car there and go on."

"Maybe you could," Drake said respectfully.

Knox went on smoothly: "Nice, running into you two. You must let me buy you a lunch at Baker."

Drake said: "Thanks. By the way, did Joe Grail pass on my request to you?"

Knox looked faintly puzzled. "Request?" he said.

"Yes, sir. I wanted to get back to Los Angeles. I thought maybe you could find a spot for me there. I told Joe about it. He said he mailed you a report every day and would mention it on his report. That was last Friday."

Cy Knox shook his head. He took a mixture of folded papers and envelopes from his inner pocket and rifled through them. He put them back and took more papers and envelopes from a pocket in the topcoat beside him. He unfolded one of the papers, glanced through it.

"Joe didn't mention you," he said. "But I'll see what I can do for you."

Knox returned the papers to the pocket. Ahead of them was a splurge of light; they were running into Baker. Most of the light was made by the waiting room, which is the biggest thing in town. The driver thumbed a switch and the lights went on in the coach. The passengers got up, moved

dearlier toward the front end and got out.

Drake and Meg and Cy Knox were the last out. Meg shivered a little. Drake had her arm and was looking down at her. He was wondering how anyone so small could be so smart—and so brave. And he was thinking there was something ravishing about the way the color of her lips contrasted with the pallor of her face.

But he didn't say that. He said: "Hurry up. Mr. Knox is waiting to feed us."

THE dining room was large, with plenty of tables and a counter in the far corner. The passengers all hurried to the counter. Knox led Drake and Meg to a table and they sat down.

Knox remained standing. "What would you like?" he said.

They both said sandwiches and coffee would be fine.

Knox went to the counter. He said something to the counterman and handed him a five-dollar bill. The bus driver had come in and was sitting at the end of the counter. Knox turned to the driver with another bill, and Drake heard him say: "I left my topcoat on the back seat. Please get it for me. Leave it at the cigar stand."

Back at the table, Knox said pleasantly: "Excuse me for a few minutes. I've got to see about getting a car."

They watched him walk out. Then Drake said: "I think that old fox is up to something."

"He scares me," admitted Meg. "Can't we get away from him?"

Drake laughed. "Where could we go? We're out in the middle of the desert."

He got up and walked over to the bus driver. He said: "My topcoat is on the back seat, too. It's the one with the large buttons. And you have my suitcase in the baggage compartment. The suitcase isn't locked and I want you to put my coat in it. Then put the suitcase back into the baggage compartment."

The driver scowled. "What the hell is this?" he grumbled.

"A game," said Drake lightly.

The driver saw the bill in Drake's hand and his scowl twisted into a grin. "Okay, pal. Say, you're going on with us, ain't you?"

"I wouldn't know," said Drake, and returned to the table.

Meg said: "I heard you. So you *have* got something to hide."

Drake sat down, leaned across the table. He said: "Tell me. Did Tim Wingate kill Joe?"

"I don't know. Tim is a swell guy. Elaine is swell, too, if she could only shake off that hard-boiled old man of hers. And don't look at me like that, because I didn't shoot Joe." She swallowed coffee. "Why, maybe *you* killed him. I really don't know much about you. I'm a fool, teaming with you. Why, I might be sitting here eating sandwiches with a murderer."

Drake said thoughtfully: "There must be a darned good reason why you ran away."

"I could say the same of you."

"You could. I wonder what Knox is up to."

Meg smiled hopefully. "Maybe he won't come back."

But Cy Knox did come back. The bus driver was just yelling, "All aboard," when Knox came in. There was another man with him, a big man in dusty tan clothes. Knox smiled and said: "This is a deputy. His name is Patullo. We—that is, Patullo and I—thought you might like to go back to Las Vegas with us."

Meg shivered.

Drake said: "We hadn't planned to do that, sir."

"I know," Knox said agreeably. "But, you see, I've phoned to Las Vegas and I learned that Joe Grail has been murdered. Surely you don't deny that you know something about that." He smiled. "I told the bus driver you wouldn't be going."

Through the window they could see the lights of the bus moving swiftly away into the blackness of the desert.

Drake took Meg's arm and said to Knox, "You may start when ready, sir."

Cy Knox moved over to the cigar stand near the entrance and the clerk behind the stand handed him a topcoat. Knox gazed at it for a moment.

"This coat," he said, "is not mine."

The clerk said: "I dunno about that. All I know is that's the coat the driver left here."

"Now that's queer," murmured Drake. "Why, that's *my* topcoat." He smiled ruefully. "The stage driver made a mistake. Your topcoat, sir, is now on the way to Los Angeles."

AT four o'clock in the morning, the main stem in Las Vegas was still brightly bustling. All the gambling places were blinking their electric invitations. But Joe Grail's little private office over the back end of the Lucky Ball was not cheerful. Joe himself had been taken away. Drake and Meg were there, and Cy Knox. There were two police officers, one of them Captain Mails.

The little party returning from Baker had not entered by way of the glittering front. They had gone around to the rear alley, ascended a roughly built stairway into a musty dusty corridor that circled Joe's little room.

Drake was standing close to Meg's chair. He said, "You don't need to get rough with Meg, nor me either. We didn't have to come back here. We were in California and we didn't have to—"

"Of course you didn't," Knox soothed. "It was nice of you to come."

Captain Mails scowled. He was a very large man with an honest face; a good man of roughneck tendencies. He was a little bewildered.

He said: "Never mind about that. You two are mixed up in this. So talk straight and fast."

Meg gazed blankly at a crack in the ceiling.

Drake turned and looked at Captain Mails. "I'll be glad to talk," he

said politely, "if you'll suggest a theme."

The captain didn't like that. He said heavily: "Smart stuff won't get you anything. But, if you want it that way, I don't mind talking first. This is how things stand. A guy had a date with Joe Grail for eleven o'clock. He was to see Joe in the business office, downstairs. Joe wasn't on hand. After a while the guy got one of the boys to go look for him. They found him up here."

Meg brought her gaze away from the ceiling. "Who," she asked softly, "was the man who had a date with Joe Grail?"

"Mr. Jake Craftman of Hollywood."

Meg suggested: "Maybe Mr. Craftman knows about the murder."

"If you mean," said Captain Mails, "that maybe Craftman killed Joe, you're all wet. Craftman just came into town yesterday. He phoned and made the date. Joe himself set the time."

Drake put in: "Okay. Joe Grail was murdered. Who've you got picked out as the killer?"

"You two ain't in the clear."

"Never mind us," smiled Drake. "Who else?"

Captain Mails hesitated, then said: "It looks like Tim Wingate. Tim had the motive. And he's hot-headed. He was sore."

"Maybe Tim had an alibi," said Meg.

The captain said: "Tim says that between nine o'clock and eleven he was just wandering around, in and out of places, watching the play. No one with him. So no alibi."

"Maybe Mr. Craftman had no alibi, either," offered Meg.

"But he did," said the captain. "He was—"

There were two doors into the room, one east and the other west. They both opened at about the same moment. Through the east door came a young lady and an older man. Mrs. Tim Wingate, softly pretty, was obviously distraught, but not her father, Jake

Craftman. Mr. Craftman was short and very sturdy, and his square face was set pugnaciously. His more tolerant associates usually said of him that he was a good fellow—if you did everything he wanted just the way he wanted it.

THROUGH the other door came a young man. He looked a little like Jack Holt in his younger days. Tim Wingate, one of Hollywood's better juveniles, was upset and more than a little defiant. An officer was pushing him into the room and he didn't like it.

Drake Judson looked up sharply. His gaze went from Tim Wingate to his wife, Elaine. The young woman's troubled eyes avoided her husband, but he stared at her, hurt and puzzled.

For a moment the silence was tense. Then Craftman said briskly: "Well, captain, how do things stand?"

Captain Mails looked up. "I'm just trying to blast these two into talking. One of the two, maybe both, is implicated."

"Yes, yes," Craftman said impatiently. "But how about the murderer?"

Captain Mails said: "No doubt about that. We already know Joe Grail was murdered by Tim Wingate."

The silence deepened again. Then there was a wild little cry. Elaine Wingate had torn herself away from her father and was running across the room. She flung herself into Tim's arms and sobbed. They stood there comforting each other, caressing, talking lover-talk, until Captain Mails interrupted.

"That stuff won't do you no good," he said uncomfortably.

Drake Judson looked at Meg again. Her eyes were still peering at the ceiling, but they were wet. Drake said to the captain: "You say Tim killed Joe Grail. But just the fact that Tim was sore at Joe, and didn't have an alibi,

doesn't make so much of a case."

Captain Mails leaned back in his chair. "We got a lot more than that," he said.

"What?"

"This is it," said the captain. "Seems there was a mix-up with a guy named Lausen. Tim saw Lausen yesterday afternoon and tried to get him to admit that Joe Grail was back of some scheme to blackmail Mrs. Wingate. But Lausen—"

"How do you know that?" asked Drake.

"Mr. Craftman tipped us off and Tim admits that much. But Lausen won't talk to Tim. Tim poked Lausen hard, then went over him. He found a note that Joe had written to Lausen. That would show a tie-up between Joe and Lausen, so Tim took the note with him." Captain Mails paused and drummed the table with his heavy forefinger. "When Joe was found dead, the note was right here on the table. That proves that Tim was up here showing that note to Joe."

"I was never up here," Tim said angrily, "until just now."

"You admit you had the note?"

"Sure."

"Then how did it get up here?"

"I—I just made a mistake."

"What mistake?"

"I called Joe Grail on the phone and he wouldn't talk to me. So early last evening, down at the hotel, I wrote him a note telling him he'd better see me. I wanted to tell him about that note I got from Lausen. I guess I was pretty well shot and I made a stupid mistake. Instead of my note, I put the one I took from Lausen into the envelope. I sent that up to Joe. I didn't discover my mistake until a couple of hours later. I know it sounds cockeyed, but—"

"Cockeyed is right," snapped Captain Mails. "You got no way of proving that yarn."

"No," admitted Tim.

Drake Judson said: "You have the note, captain?"

CAPTAIN MAILS carefully took out a piece of paper, smoothed it out and spread it on the table. He said: "This is it."

Drake leaned over the table and read it:

Fred:

Don't try to see or phone me. I will get in touch with you later. There are reasons.

JOE

"Sure that's Joe's handwriting?" queried Drake.

"Not a doubt of it."

Drake said: "Well, did Joe mail this to Lausen?"

"No. Night before last Joe Grail called at Lausen's hotel. Lausen was out. So Joe left this note in Lausen's call box."

Meg spoke up suddenly: "Maybe Fred Lausen killed Joe."

Captain Mails chuckled harshly. "Not a chance. He's a bad one, but he has an alibi. Between nine and twelve he was talking with Mr. Craftman."

Craftman barked: "That's right. I was trying to dicker with him. And I think this has gone far enough." He glared at his daughter. "Elaine, you come with me."

The young woman seemed suddenly very calm. She said: "No, father. You've been wrong. And I've been wrong. From now on I'm sticking with Tim."

Captain Mails got up. He said: "We'll book Tim Wingate for murder—"

"No you won't," cut in Drake Judson sharply. "Tim didn't kill Joe Grail. I know who did, and I can prove it in three minutes."

Captain Mails, with angry sarcasm, said: "Well, who did?"

Drake backed away a little. He slipped out an automatic, fingered it cautiously. He said: "I've got him covered."

His gun was pointing at Cy Knox.

Knox was motionless. His eyes peered at Drake blankly. He said



quietly: "This man is crazy. I wasn't even in town. There isn't any motive. I had no reason to—"

"The motive is easy," cut in Drake. "Maybe I can't prove that off-hand but it can be checked. Joe Grail was close to you in your Los Angeles racks. You opened this place up here and transferred him here. The reason was that he had got to know too much about some things and you didn't trust him. But you found out he was still too nosy and might buy you plenty trouble. That's the motive."

Captain Mails said shortly: "But I understand Mr. Knox was out of town. He met you way down at Yucca Grove, on his way—"

"Cy Knox had already been here," Drake said. "He's got a very fast car. He could step her up to eighty or ninety coming through the desert. He came here, entered the back way without being seen, drilled Joe, then left and went back to Yucca Grove, where he put on that play about his engine going bad. Just fixing himself a little alibi."

Still Knox said nothing. Captain Mails said: "That don't prove he was here."

DRAKE said: "Knox walked up the steps from the alley and came in the back way. That back door is a low one, and dark. It is also rough unfinished board. There are cobwebs all around and above. Cy Knox keeps his hat on. He bumped his head as he came in. It smudged his hat with cobwebs. It's still smudged. It was the first thing I noticed when he sat with us on the stage—his hat was dirty."

"I couldn't think of anywhere else he could have got the cobwebs," Drake paused. "Also, his hat is a furry felt one. It is almost certain some of the material got caught in the splinters above the door. You can check on that."

"We can check on that," agreed Captain Mails reluctantly. "Anything else?"

Drake said to Tim Wingate: "About

that note you sent to Joe. Did you put it in an envelope?"

"Of course. The hotel stationery. And addressed it in pencil."

"Was the note in an envelope when you found it?" Drake asked Captain Mails.

"No. It was just lying on the table in front of him."

"Sure. When Knox killed Joe, he naturally went through his pockets, looking for stuff that might affect him. He found that note in the envelope. He figured it would tie someone into the killing if he left it in plain sight. He brought Meg and me back here for the same reason—to poke the finger of suspicion at Tim."

"What else about the note?" prompted Captain Mails.

"He put the note on the table, but of course he had to take the envelope with him," Drake smiled. "Even the foxiest crook slips up somewhere. Cy Knox did."

"Where?"

"Just a little thing. The envelope. He no doubt expected to destroy it at the first opportunity. He let it go a little too long. On the stage I saw a hotel envelope with some stuff in Knox's topcoat pocket. It was addressed to Joe Grail in Tim's handwriting. I thought it might be connected."

"Where is it now?"

"Still in that pocket. I didn't want to give Knox a chance to get rid of it, so I worked a little trick. The coat is in my suitcase, on the way to Los Angeles. I haven't touched it. The stage driver put it in my suitcase." Drake chuckled. "Modern science can do wonders. You can check on that envelope and find evidence that Cy Knox handled it."

Captain Mails said: "We can check on it."

Everybody was looking at Cy Knox. He said nothing. He peered out of his lusterless eyes and blinked once. Then he made a motion with his right hand, toward his inner pocket.

Drake said sharply: "Cut that."

Knox smiled thinly. His hand came

out and there was a cigar in it. He said, almost pleasantly: "Don't worry. I don't often go in for violence. Anyhow, not in person. I'll go along. I may not be an angel, but Joe Grail—no matter who killed him—was a rat. I'll take my chance in a trial."

Elaine Wingate, paying no attention to her father, was very close to Tim, who paid no attention to anyone but Elaine. Drake looked at Meg. Meg, watching Elaine and Tim, seemed a little shaky.

She said huskily, "This is swell!"

Drake touched her arm and said: "You're going soft, my dear. You need some breakfast."

Drake and Meg had breakfast down at the Silver Dollar. Drake ordered ham and eggs for two and said: "Why did you *really* try to leave town?"

"Had to do it," said Meg. "Joe had found out I was working for Tim. That's why he wanted to see me. If Joe knew, maybe somebody else knew. I figured if I stayed around they'd use me to connect Tim with Joe. For all I knew, Tim *had* shot him." She looked up quickly. "Why did *you* leave?"

Drake said: "Just routine. The agency has a standing order that if anything like that happens the operative must report in person to the office at once."

Meg smiled. "Sure it wasn't because you had your eye on me?"

"That's past," said Drake. "In the future I'm never going to lose sight of you. Divorces are quick in this town, honey. But so are marriages. Okay?"

Meg smiled again. "Breakfast with you is nice. Pass the sugar, darling."



A couple of small-time crooks rode hell's highway—only to skid into a . . .

Detour to the Morgue

By Ronald Henderson

THE sedan hurtled around the bend in the dirt road, kicking up a swirl of dust like a miniature tornado. The man gripping the wheel tossed his companion with his elbow.

"Farmhouse," he said tersely.

The other occupant of the car lifted his head with an effort. His arms were clasped tightly about his middle.

"We'll — have to — stop, Jake," he gasped. His face twisted in pain.

The driver eased his foot from the accelerator and the car slowed down to normal speed. "I keep telling you, Sam, we can't stop now." His harsh voice was edged with temper. "The whole countryside is on the lookout for us. You'd be a dead giveaway." His deep-set black eyes burned under bushy eyebrows. His thin lips pressed tight as he punched a button on the dashboard.

A nasal voice whined out of the radio, low at first, then gaining in volume.

"Armed and dangerous. The bank guard shot one of the men before falling under a hail of bullets, but both bandits succeeded in making their escape. If you see a black sedan bearing Illinois plates, notify the nearest police officer at once. All highways are being patrolled—"

Jake grunted as he cut the radio off. "Yokels," he scoffed. "They're so dumb they think we still have the old plates."

"I've—gotta have—a doctor, Jake," Sam pleaded. His round, moonish face writhed in agony. "I'm hit bad."

Jake pointed with his chin at the farmhouse. A towheaded boy about four or five years old was running out to the road, waving his arms at the approaching car.

Jake stepped on the brake, pulled the car to a stop. He glanced quickly at the farmhouse, but no one appeared in the doorway. He looked at the youngster who had stepped on the running board. Tears were streaming down the boy's face.

"What's the matter, kid?"

"Something's happened to Muzzer," the boy cried. "She laid down in the kitchen and just rolls her eyes. I've got to get Doctor Haskins."

Jake's eyes shifted to his companion, then he turned to the boy again. "Where's your father?"

"He had to go to town," the boy sobbed.

"Won't he be back soon?"

"Not till tonight. I'm all alone with her and I've got to get the doctor."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "Why don't you phone?"

"We don't have a phone."

JAKE spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Sam. "This is almost too good to be true." The words were scarcely audible. "You can stay here while I go with the kid for the doc." He turned to the youngster, his face twisting into what he thought was a smile of reassurance. "Don't worry, kid, I'll get the doc for you."

He stepped out of the car and motioned to Sam to follow. "Get in," he said to the boy. "I'll be with you in a minute."



Sam stepped on the ground, groaning and doubled up like a jackknife. They stood just out of earshot of the boy.

"Do you think it's all right, Jake?"

"Sure. It's a cinch. The doc will come running to fix up the kid's mother and he can take that slug out of you. There's no telephone. This is the break we've been needing. Just go in the house and lay low till I get back with the doc."

He watched Sam stagger toward the farmhouse, clutching his stomach, then stepped into the car.

"Isn't the other man coming?" the boy asked. He had stopped crying now, seemed suddenly relieved that responsibility had been shouldered by a grownup.

"No," Jake answered as he put the car in gear. "He'll look after things while we're gone."

He drove in silence for a few minutes, then he took his eyes from the road to look at the boy. "How far off does Doc Haskins live?"

"Not far. About five miles down the road. I was going to walk it when I heard you coming."

"I didn't know there was a village so near," Jake said.

"Doc Haskins doesn't live in the village," the boy said as though surprised that the man didn't know this. "He runs the state stock farm."

Jake smiled when he heard this, but he made no comment. He had been a little worried about driving into a village. The voice on the radio hadn't given any description of him and Sam, but the police might have it.

In a few minutes the boy spoke again. "Right around the next bend is Doc's farm."

The car came onto a level stretch and Jake saw a rambling, white farmhouse set back from the road. To one side was a huge, red barn with a silo standing beside it.

Jake stopped the car on the road. "We won't bother to go up the driveway," he explained. "Save time this way." No harm in playing safe, he

thought, as he pushed the horn on the steering post.

A GRAY-HAIRED, chunkily built man appeared on the veranda, shading his eyes and looking toward them. A black spaniel scampered at his heels, wigwagging his friendliness.

The boy got out of the car and started running up the little hill to the house.

"Doc," he shouted. "Doc Haskins."

The old man walked slowly down the steps and held the boy who had flung his arms around his waist. He patted the boy's head reassuringly while the youngster bubbled out his story. Then he took him in his arms and carried him back to the car. The dog kept leaping at the boy, barking his welcome.

"Little Jimmy here seemed to be upset for a minute." There was a friendly smile on his weather-beaten face as he let the boy down and watched him roll in the grass with the dog.

Jake glanced sideways from beneath his bushy brows at the genial-faced old doctor. "Yeah," he said. "Don't blame him. She's in pretty bad shape."

"What do you figure happened to her?" Doctor Haskins asked casually. From his tone he might have been discussing the sudden lameness of a plow horse.

"I don't know," Jake said sharply. "I'm no doctor." The old man's lack of concern irritated him. "But you'd better come with us right away."

"Can't go now," Doc Doc Haskins drawled. "Taking care of a sick cow. Besides, I don't think it's that serious. Just a case of cramps maybe. She'll get over it."

"It's more than cramps, Doc." He tried to make his voice sound worried. Damn these country doctors. Nothing ever bothers them. Taking care of a sick cow! "Her pulse was very rapid. I'd say she had a stroke."

Doc Haskins looked at him quickly. "Her pulse was fast, you say?" He stroked the gray stubble on his chin.

Jake was quick to impress the need for speed on the old doctor. "Her color was high too. Looked like she was choking for breath."

"Fast pulse, high color," the doctor mused.

Jake watched him with mounting irritation as he seemed to be making up his mind. Then the doctor looked at him. His face was serious now, the blue eyes no longer twinkling.

"In that case it's something besides cramps. Just wait till I run up to the house and get my bag."

Jake turned the car around and sat watching the boy romp on the lawn with the spaniel. A sardonic smile appeared on his face as he made plans for the getaway after the doc had taken care of Sam. He decided to keep the doc and the kid with them as hostages until they cleared the state line.

Then He looked at his wrist-watch. The doddering old fool had been gone all of ten minutes. He leaned on the horn, then saw the old doctor come out of the house as if in answer to his summons, and walk slowly down the driveway.

"**S**ORRY to keep you waiting," Doc Haskins apologized as he placed his black bag on the floor of the car. "Mislaidd some medicine."

Jake grunted his annoyance and told Jimmy to get in the car.

During the drive back to the farmhouse, the two men rode in silence.

Jimmy sat in the back, playing with the dog.

Jake pulled in the graveled driveway and up to the door. The place looked as deserted as when he left it. He was glad that Sam didn't come to the door. It was just as well the old doctor didn't know what he was in for until they got in the house.

He stepped out of the car and onto the veranda. He looked back to see Doc Haskins helping Jimmy out of the car. A smile creased his face as he opened the screen door and stepped into the house.

"Stick 'em up!"

Jake's smile froze as he looked into the bore of a rifle held in the hands of a stern-faced, roughly dressed man. Panicky, he looked around the room, saw three other men with guns trained on him. On the couch he saw Sam, doubled over in pain.

The screen door slammed shut behind him. He heard the doctor's chuckle.

"Got them all right, boys?"

"It's them all right," the man with the rifle answered. "Found the wounded one waiting here."

Jake looked at the doctor, his face twisted in a snarl.

Doctor Haskins smiled genially. "What took me so long back at the house was calling the sheriff," he drawled. "Td heard the alarm sent out over the radio, but I didn't connect you with the killers till you told me the patient had a fast pulse and a high color." He chuckled in enjoyment at Jake's puzzled face. "Muzzzer is Jimmy's spaniel."



Satan's Search Warrant



★ ★ ★

The slab-happy dip's death looked like an accident. But Investigator Hayden had to unwind plenty of red tape to dope out the killing—and then get tangled up in a homicide net himself.

★ ★ ★

By Fredric Brown

BIG BEN HAYDEN woke up, not screaming, but wanting to scream. Two ghouls, each taller than a house, had been fighting each other to decide which of them would eat Ben for an hors d'oeuvre, while he had crouched, unable to escape, in a blind alley. A grinning ghost, holding a huge gong in one hand and a thighbone in the other, was refereeing the bout and even now

was hammering the gong to indicate the end of the first round. Or had been hammering it until Ben woke up.

His eyes now open, Big Ben sighed with relief at the sight of familiar and friendly things; the luminous dial of his alarm clock on the table next to the bed; beyond it the outlined pane of the window with heavy rain beating hard against the glass.

But *something* was still ringing. Ben reached out to shut off the alarm clock, then remembered that he hadn't turned it on and that anyway its dial said eleven o'clock and that he'd gone to bed only an hour ago. The phone then; he reached across the clock and knocked the phone off the table. Then, with appropriate remarks, he got out of bed, turned on the light, and picked up the phone.

"Ben Hayden talking," he said.

"Cap Rogers, Ben. Listen, can you come down to the station right away? We're in a jam."

Ben's eyes went to the window. In the glass he could see the reflection of himself, a mountainous figure grotesque in awning-stripe pajamas. And, symbolically, the driving rain was beating hard against the reflection. Buckets of cold and unpleasantly wet rain.

He said, "Aw, Cap. I just got to sleep and you want me to come down there? On a night like this!"

"Right away, you lummox," said the telephone receiver firmly. "Look, this is a real storm. There've been wrecks all over town and two houses have blown down and the force is going nuts. And the homicide men all went out on a lead on the Yeager business and then this Elkins thing comes in."

YAWNING widely, Ben looked at the window pane again and then deliberately averted his eyes from it. "Aw right," he said. "I'll get dressed and be in as soon as I—"

"Hey, wait," cut in Rogers. "Come to think of it, you don't need to come

here. I'll give you the dope and you can go right around to the Wescott Apartments from your place. It's nearer."

"That crooks' nest," Ben grunted. "Which of 'em murdered which?"

"Remember Billy Elkins?"

"The slap-happy little dip? Hell, I thought he was in jail."

"Released this afternoon. He's slab-happy now. They just took him in to the morgue. Found him at the bottom of the airshaft at the Westcott. But it wasn't murder."

"No?"

"Don't look like it, anyway. There were some sheets fastened to a bed in a vacant furnished apartment on the sixth. Looks like he was shinnying down those sheets to burglarize the apartment below. Paul Durban's apartment."

"Funny," said Ben. "Didn't he used to be a sidekick of Durban's? Work for him, too, once in a while?"

"Yeah. Look, you can get the details when you get there. We're putting it on the blotter as accidental death while attempting a felony. But you go 'round there and make a nuisance of yourself, just in case. Talk to Paul Durban, and to Rafe Murro, and to Hoberg. They all live there."

"Billy Elkins had a wife, didn't he? What's about her?"

"You find out," said Rogers. "So long."

Ben put the receiver back on the hook, and shivered. Trying not to look at the window, he dressed, putting on his oldest suit. He hesitated a moment before putting on his suit coat, wondering whether to strap on his shoulder holster, weighing the pros and cons of whether to pack a gun. The cons won; the darn thing would get wet and he'd have to take it apart and clean it when he got home.

He didn't phone for a cab because there was a stand around the corner. That was his first mistake, as he discovered as soon as he stepped outside. Before he reached the corner, he was

soaking wet, and when he got there, there weren't any cabs at the stand.

Big Ben ducked his head into the wind and started grimly to walk—almost to swim—the six blocks that would take him to the Wescott Apartments. He couldn't get much wetter, anyway. There was a label in his topcoat that said *Waterproof*, but that label was a snare and a delusion on a night like this. The rain drove into his face and neck like water squirted from a hose; it ran down inside and outside his collar, and even seemed to creep up his trouser-legs from below. He walked with a squashing sound because the overshoes he had optimistically put on kept the water which ran down inside his shoes from running out again.

But, eventually, he got there. He stood in the lobby a moment to catch his breath, and then rang the janitor's bell. The lock on the inner door clicked and he went in. A sleepy-looking little man in a bathrobe peered out a door at the end of the hallway.

Ben identified himself, and then asked, "Who found the body, and when?"

"Mrs. Craddock heard it hit," said the janitor. "About half-past nine. She lives in 2-A, and she was in the bathroom then and heard a heck of a thud out in the airshaft. So she opens the window and looks down, and there he is right under the window, only a floor down. The airshaft goes down almost to ground level."

"She's the one who phoned the police?"

"I guess so; I didn't even know till they got here. Nobody tells me these things. But if a radiator starts to leak or a washer on a faucet gets loose, then—"

"Yeah," said Big Ben. "How many apartments open on the airshaft? Have windows on the airshaft, I mean."

"All of 'em. There are four apartments on each floor, see? And they're all laid out alike, so all three rooms of every apartment has windows on

the outside. All the bathrooms have windows on the airshaft in the middle, and only the bathrooms. The airshaft's in the middle, and all the bathrooms have windows on—"

"Yeah," said Ben. "You mean the bathrooms have windows on the airshaft. Let's see—there are seven floors and four apartments to a floor, so there'd be twenty-eight apartments, and twenty-eight bathroom windows on the airshaft, huh?"

"That's right. And it was 6-A, over Mrs. Craddock's that he climbed out the window of."

"That'd be a bathroom window," said Ben. "The chief told me the sheets were fastened to a bed. How could he?"

THE janitor shook his head. "You got that wrong. I saw it. He took three sheets offa the bed and knotted 'em together and tied 'em to the double faucet on the bathtub, just inside the window."

"Three sheets," said Ben. "That'd take him down two floors at most. He was trying to get in 5-A or 4-A, wouldn't you say?"

"Likely, yeah. But that airshaft's only four feet square. It could have been any of the apartments on the fourth or fifth. He could get down till he had a foot on the windowsill of, say, 5-A, and then step across to one of the other windows. But, yeah, 4-A or 5-A would be the easiest. Paul Durban lives in 5-A."

"Thanks," said Ben. "Guess I'll go there first."

He squashed his way to the automatic elevator and pushed the button to bring down the car. While he waited, he saw the janitor come out with a mop and start work on the big puddle where Ben had stood outside his door. Ben grinned, and called back, "It's raining out, in case you ain't noticed."

The elevator car was down now, but Ben thought of something and paused with the door halfway open. "Hey," he called back. "You remem-

ber what time this drizzle started?"

"Started to rain hard about the time the police got here. Let's see—that'd be quarter of ten. It came up sudden; come to think of it, it hadn't rained at all before then, since this afternoon."

"Oh," said Ben. "Then it wouldn't have been raining at all when he climbed out into the airshaft, would it?"

"I guess not. Nine-thirty—yeah, it started just after that."

Ben got into the elevator and punched the button marked 5. A minute later, he knocked on the door of 5-A.

Paul Durban, sleek in patent-leather hair and a silk dressing gown, looked aghast at the dripping figure on his threshold.

He said, "Migod, Hayden, next time you go swimming, dress for it. Come in, but not very far, and please *don't* sit down. This furniture is mine."

"Oh," said Ben. "They rent these apartments either way?"

"Sure."

"How come you're not down at that club of yours tonight?" Ben asked. He pushed the door shut behind him and leaned against it, looking around. This was the one big room of the apartment. Off it to the left was a small kitchen with a breakfast nook, and to the right was the bedroom, from which would open the door to the bath.

"Monday night," said Durban. "I always take off Monday night, and sometimes Tuesday, too. The place gets along. Glad I did, tonight. With this storm, there won't be enough business to put in your eye."

"What time did you see Billy Elkins last?" Ben asked.

"You mean alive? Haven't seen him since he went to jail a year ago. Since a couple of weeks before that. We had a quarrel at that time."

"Um," said Ben. "Anything serious?"

"Enough," Durban told him. "I found he'd been doing some petty pil-

fering at the night club. I'd been keeping him going, off and on, for over a year, every time the sledding was tough for him. Then when he—well, you get the idea."

BEN grinned. "Sure, I get the idea. You knew he was a petty dip, but that was all right as long as he didn't dip into your till. No honor among—Skip it. Had he tried to get in touch with you since he got out of stir today?"

"Tonight," said Durban. "A little before nine, I got a call from Tony—he handles things at the club when I'm not there. He said Billy had been there looking for me. When I wasn't there, Tony said, Billy told him he'd come around here to see me. Tony told him I wouldn't be home, but Billy was coming anyway. He didn't believe Tony."

"Um," said Ben. "But he decided to come in the bathroom window instead of the front door. That was the way you figure it?"

"Seems like it. Anyway, about fifteen minutes after Tony called to warn me Billy was coming, my doorbell rang. It's a fifteen minute walk from here to the club, so I knew who it was, and I didn't answer it."

"So he figured you weren't home, and it'd be a good time to pull a spot of burglary, huh? But instead of that, you were giving him the runaround."

"Call it that if you want," said Durban. "I was through with him. I told him a year ago I was washed up with him and kicked him out. He had a nerve to try to see me at all."

Ben nodded. "Guess you're right, at that. Well, it seems to make sense. Fifteen minutes or so after he thinks he finds you ain't home, he plops down the airshaft. How could he have known the flat above here was empty, though?"

"He could tell that from the mailbox, in the lobby. All but the vacant ones got names on them."

"Yeah," said Ben. "Who else lives here in the building had any con-

tact with Elkins, that you know of?"

"Murro," said Durban. "Rafael Murro, down on the third floor. Murro was Billy's lawyer when they put him away last year. Did a good job of getting him off with that sentence."

"You figure maybe he'd have rung Murro's bell when nobody answered yours?"

Durban shrugged.

"Well, I'll ask Murro anyway," said Ben. "Anybody else?"

"Frank Hoberg. Used to do a little business with Billy, or so I've heard. Don't quote me on it."

Big Ben didn't ask what kind of business. Hoberg was a fence; he knew that.

Instead he asked, "What about Mitzie, Billy's wife? Know what she's doing lately or where she stays?"

"I don't," said Durban. "She came to see me just after Billy got sent up. She wanted a job as a cigarette girl at the club, and I gave it to her. She was a good kid and I didn't figure I should take it out on her just because Billy was a rat. She held the job for—let's see—maybe eight months, and then quit. I haven't seen her since."

"Say why she was quitting?"

"I wasn't there the night it happened, but she had a blow-up with Tony about something or other. She said she had a better job offered her anyway and walked out."

"Job or proposition? Or could you guess?"

"I don't know. Far as I know—up to four months ago anyway—she was still carrying a torch for Billy."

"Who'd know where she is now?" Ben asked.

"Murro might. As Billy's lawyer, he ought to know."

"Thanks," said Ben. "I'll go see him. By the way, is blackmail still a sideline with Murro, or has it crowded his law practice into the back-ground by now?"

"I wouldn't know," said Durban. "He never had anything on me. Shall I send the bill for a new rug to the department, or to you personally?"

"Send it to Cap Rogers," said Ben. "He sent me out in this tonight. And split with me if he pays; it hurts me more than it does your rug. Well, so long."

GOING back down to the lobby, Ben studied the rows of mailboxes, confirming what Durban had told him—6-A, above Durban, was vacant—7-A, above that, was labeled Frank Hoberg. But that couldn't mean anything in particular. You couldn't get into 7-A from the empty apartment below it with knotted sheets; not unless you could do the Hindu rope trick.

He went back in—he'd left the door ajar with a pencil stuck in to keep it from closing—and took the elevator up to the sixth.

Everything in 6-A seemed to be on the up-and-up. Three sheets had been yanked off the bed. Knotted together, they were tied to the heavy faucet fixture of the bathtub, which was right under the airshaft window. Someone had pulled them back inside, but hadn't untied them. They were still wet.

He opened the window and leaned out to look down. Couldn't see anything down there, but then there'd be nothing to see anyway. The body was taken away and the rain that was now running down the back of his neck had washed away any stains.

He closed the window, and went down to 3-B. Rafael Murro let him in without any evidence of pleasure at seeing him.

"About Billy Elkins," said Big Ben. "When'd you see him last?"

"Few weeks ago," Murro told him. "At the jail. I kept in touch with him, of course."

"When'd you see his wife last?"

"Last week, I believe."

"Where's she living and what's she doing?"

Murro said, "She's staying at the Indiana Hotel—or was then. I don't know what she's doing. That's none of my business."

"Um," said Ben. "Not if it's honest, it ain't. You didn't see Elkins today, since he got out? Nor hear from him?"

"No."

"Know any reason why Billy Elkins would have seen, or tried to see, Frankie Hoberg?"

"No."

"Um," said Ben again. He took off his hat and looked at it, and then put it on again. There was something about this case he didn't like. It was too simple, too pat. Everything fitted, except that in a building lousy with potential murderers, a guy like Elkins had to get himself accidentally killed.

He tried a fresh tack. He said, "Billy Elkins was a small-time punk, and your services come high. Or so I'm told. You worked hard on Billy's case. You got him off in a year, and otherwise it'd have been ten. Where'd he ever get the kind of sugar you'd ask for doing that?"

Murro shrugged. "My fee wasn't high. He paid it, and it's not my business where he got the money?"

"It ought to've been our business," said Ben. "We should've looked into it at the time. But wait a minute. Suppose he didn't pay you—in money."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Sure, you do. Blackmail. Billy Elkins didn't have any money, but why couldn't he have given you something that would have let you put the screws on somebody that had dough."

The lawyer smiled. "An interesting theory," he said.

"Um," said Big Ben. "The more you think of it, the more interesting it gets. It wouldn't have been Durban; Durban's legitimate. He makes enough out of his night club that I don't think he has a racket. But Elkins did business with Hoberg. He could have put the finger on Hoberg, couldn't he?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I wouldn't either," said Ben, "but I aim to find out. I'm going to use your phone, if you don't mind—or even if you do. I think Elkins' death outside

your window is enough of an excuse that I can get somebody sent down here with a search warrant." He was squashing his way across the room toward the telephone while he talked. "And maybe if I stick around until the warrant gets here—"

"Take him, Pete." It was Murro's voice, and it was hard as ice. Just before Big Ben Hayden got to the phone.

"Up, copper," said another voice, and Ben raised his hands slowly as he turned.

A DARK, stocky man Ben had never seen before stood in the doorway that led to the bedroom. He held a revolver with a silencer on its barrel, aimed at Ben.

"Hold it," said Murro. He took down a picture from the wall and spun the dial of a safe that had been behind it. He thrust into his pocket a small bundle of papers that he took from the safe, and then closed it again.

He said, "We'll have to take the copper for a ride, Pete. I should have had sense enough to get these things out of here before, after we found out Elkins broke his damn neck. We'll have to stash them somewhere else, too."

"Okay," said the man he'd called Pete. "Look, step behind him and frisk him, will you, Rafe?"

Murro came around behind Ben, felt his hip pockets and side pockets first, and then stepped in close to reach around to the front. He had to stand close to do that; it took a man with long arms to encircle Big Ben Hayden's girth. Murro's hands felt his vest pockets, and that meant Murro was standing very close to him and he could feel Murro's breath on the back of his neck.

Ben's hands were shoulder high, and he'd bent his elbows so they were in close to his neck—and to Murro's head.

This, Ben had a hunch, was going to be the best chance he'd be likely to

get to make a break. And he took it.

He moved with a suddenness that few would have believed possible in a man of his dimensions. His upraised hands darted back over his shoulders and clamped on the sides of the lawyer's head, and the instant those hands made contact with their objective, Ben threw his weight forward from the waist, hurling Murro over Ben's head, into the gunman and the gun.

The silenced pistol was coughing dryly. Twice it coughed and then there was a thud that shook the walls, another thud, and silence.

Ben looked first at the man whose hand still held the pistol, and then at the lawyer. He put a pudgy hand on the chest of each of them, over where the heartbeat should have been. Then he went across the room to the telephone, and called Captain Rogers.

He said, "This is Ben. I'm in Rafe Murro's apartment. Better send the wagon."

"What happened?"

"All of a sudden, murder," said Ben. "Guy named Pete shot Rafe Murro in the head with a pistol. Bullet went straight in from the top and straight down. You'll probably find it somewhere down around his ankles."

"The hell! And the killer—have you got—"

"Then Rafe went ahead and killed this here Pete," said Ben. "He slammed into him going ninety miles an hour and knocked Pete backwards and Pete's head took a big chunk of wood out of the door jamb. It didn't do Pete's head any good either. So you can book 'em for killing each other."

"You kidding me, Ben? How could—"

"You'll see when you get here, Cap. Or whenever whoever you send gets here. And listen, in Rafe Murro's pocket, there's going to be plenty evidence to tie him up to the blackmail we figured he was pulling. I threw a scare in him by talking about a search warrant, and he got tough."

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"Did he have anything to do with Elkins' death, Ben?"

"I dunno, Cap. I'm still working on that. I'm going to keep on working on it, but I'll be around the building somewhere when the wagon gets here. Look, what was the result of the examination on Billy Elkins?"

"Killed instantly. That was a narrow shaft, and he hit his head on a couple window sills on the way down. We found blood on them. If you want a list of all the bones fractured—"

"I don't," said Ben. "I'll take your word for it. What all was in his pockets? Did he have any money or was he broke?"

"Just some small change. But he sure had a lot of other stuff in his pockets. Want to hear the list?"

"Sure," said Ben. "Read it, will you?"

BEN listened closely, and whistled. Then he put the receiver back on the hook and looked up the phone number of the Indiana Hotel.

A sleepy voice answered.

"Mitzie Elkins, please," said Ben.

"She checked out today."

Ben said, "That's funny. I had an appointment with her. Did she say where she was going, or give any forwarding address?"

"No. She left rather hurriedly this morning and said she'd give us an address later. If she gets in touch with us, who shall I tell her called?"

"Her husband," said Ben. "This is Billy Elkins. Sure she didn't leave any message for me?"

"No, she didn't."

"Funny," said Ben, and he put the receiver back on the hook. It was funny. Mitzie Elkins must have learned this morning that her husband was getting out of jail in the afternoon. And if she was still in love with him, she'd taken a funny way of showing it.

There was a decanter of whisky on the table. Murro hadn't offered Ben a drink, but he figured Murro wouldn't mind now. So he had one. It made him

feel warm inside and that made him realize how cold and wet the outside of him still was.

Dammit, why couldn't he make up his mind that Billy Elkins had simply fallen down that airshaft? It made sense.

But the farther he got into this case, the farther there was to go. Now he'd have to find out why Mitzie had run out this morning. Maybe have to go sloshing out in the rain again, hunting her.

And he'd have to see Frankie Hoberg and ask him—

Hey! How about those papers that were in Murro's pocket? Maybe there was a lead there to the Elkins business.

Ben went over and got the papers, glanced through them. There were leads, in those papers, to lots of things that Cap Rogers would find interesting. Things that—

Then, on the second last one, he caught a glimpse of the signature, "Wm. Elkins." Ben read it carefully, and said, "I'll be damned. Right on the head!"

And he wondered vaguely if he'd been psychic. He'd taken a random shot in the dark by asking Murro if Billy Elkins had paid him off in material for blackmail against Hoberg. It had been a bull's-eye.

The paper he had in his hand was a confession signed by Elkins, which incriminated Hoberg as the fence who handled everything Billy had stolen. Signing that confession, then, had been the price Billy had paid for Murro's services in getting a ten-year sentence divided by ten. Did Mitzie know he'd signed? She must have.

And Hoberg would know, of course. That knowledge would have cost him plenty of sugar. Then Hoberg *did* have a motive for killing Elkins.

The paper still in his hand, Ben strolled over to the window and stared out into the rain. Maybe Hoberg had—

The Black Maria was pulling up, out in front. Two men with yellow slickers over blue uniforms got out and ran

toward the door, and a few seconds later, Murro's doorbell buzzed. Ben went over and pushed the button that would unlatch the door.

THEN, on a sudden impulse, he slipped the paper incriminating Hoberg into his own pocket and the others back into Murro's. Dammit, he might as well follow through with that paper now, and get it over with. Then he could swim back home, take a hot bath, and get back to bed.

He heard the elevator start up, had another quick snort of Murro's whisky, and then let the patrolmen in the door. He said, "Hi, boys. Nothing for you to do but take these two mugs to the morgue. It's under control. But there are some important papers in the guy's pocket. See that they don't get lost, and that Rogers gets them."

"Okay, Ben. You're coming in with us, aren't you?"

Ben shook his head. "This was a sideline. Me, I'm still worrying about a guy falling down an airshaft. Tell Rogers I'll phone him again later."

"But he said you was to come in with us and explain about these guys and—"

"Tell him also, nuts," said Ben. "I want to get this over with so I can go home."

He went down to the elevator, got in, and punched the button for the top floor, the seventh.

He knocked on the door of 7-A. He didn't know Hoberg, but he'd heard him described, and he recognized the ratty little man who opened the door as fitting the description.

"Police," he said. "Want to talk to you, Hoberg."

Hoberg hesitated only a second, then opened the door wide enough for Ben to step through. Ben did, and wished he hadn't. There were two other men in the room, and they both looked tough. Hoberg he could have broken with one hand, but the other two men looked like ex-pugs. Ben wished now that he'd borrowed a gun from one of the men who'd come with

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the wagon. But he hadn't thought of it, then.

"This says it's a copper, boys," said Hoberg to the two men. "It wants to talk to me."

"Yeah," said Ben. "About Billy Elkins. He fell down your airshaft to-night. Suppose you've heard about it."

"Sure," said Hoberg. He looked relieved, and became suddenly less belligerent. "Sure, I heard about it. When I got home. I—we were out then."

"When was this?"

"Happened at nine-thirty, didn't it? That's what I heard. Me and my pals here didn't get home till after ten. And if you think it ain't an alibi, think again. We were in night court. Benny and Dutch were in a little trouble, and I bailed them out."

"Sounds good," said Ben. "What time'd you leave there?"

"Not till almost ten. Ask Judge Steinke, or the court clerk." Hoberg grinned.

"Steinke's good enough for me," said Ben. "I'll check with him later. Seen Billy Elkins since he got out?"

"No."

"Or Mitzie?"

"Hell, no. That wren's poison. Billy was nuts about her; he'd have stuck a shiv in anyone that looked at her."

"I have a hunch," said Ben, "that somebody's been looking at her plenty. You wouldn't know who?"

"I wouldn't," said Hoberg. "I haven't seen her around since she quit working at Durban's place three months or so ago."

"OKAY, Hoberg," said Ben. "Guess you're clean on the Elkins business. But you'll have to come with me to the station just the same. We've got another charge against you."

"The hell you have. You coppers ain't got a thing—" Hoberg stared incredulously at Ben. "Or did that louse Murro—"

"Murro's dead," said Ben. He could

have bit his tongue the moment he said it. Definitely, it was the wrong thing. If he'd kept his yap shut, Hoberg would have come along without a struggle. He'd have figured it was a rap he could beat, nothing worth trying to shoot his way out of. But now there was a mean-looking little thirty-two in Hoberg's hand, and Hoberg stepped forward and held it against Ben's chest.

"Hey," said one of the ex-pugs uneasily. "Go easy, Frankie. That's a copper and we don't want to be tangled in—"

"Shut up," said Hoberg. "If Murro's dead, then maybe this guy's got—" His free left hand had first tapped Ben's pockets for a revolver, and then it slid into Ben's inside coat pocket and came out with the folded paper that was Billy Elkins' confession. Without letting the gun waver, he partly unfolded it and glanced at the signature. He sucked in his breath and let it out audibly, as he crumpled the paper into his own pocket.

He said, "Benny, Dutch. We got to take this copper out and—"

The mugs were standing now, behind Hoberg. One of them said, "Nuts, Frankie. This is your business, not ours. Why should we stick our heads into a noose just because—"

"You got to," yelled Hoberg. "You got to help me, because I got plenty on both of you. How about that St. Louis business where the two guards got—"

Something black and heavy rose in the air behind Hoberg's head, and descended. Hoberg dropped, and Ben—who had seen it coming—tried to grab at the gun that had been in Hoberg's hand. But missed.

"Hold it," said one of the two men, and the black automatic whose butt had hit Hoberg was now trained on Ben Hayden. The other man bent down over the huddled figure of Hoberg.

He said, "You stopped his clock."

"Hell," said the one with the gun. "We might as well've played along in the first place. Now we got to rub out the copper. Hell."

Ben said reasonably, "You don't have to kill me if you don't want to. You can tie me up. You'll have to lam anyway; they'll find out you were with Hoberg. He was with you in court half an hour ago. And he wasn't any loss to society, but if you kill a cop—"

"Nuts," said the man with the gun. "Hoberg was a rat, but they use as many volts on you for killing a rat as—"

The other of the two mugs stood up. He had Hoberg's gun in his left hand, and he'd been frisking Hoberg's pockets with the other. He said, "Twenty lousy bucks. We're broke, and that's all the louse has on him. We'll have to lam on twenty lousy bucks."

Funny, Ben thought, how crooks ran true to type. Now, in the middle of danger and murder, their first thought was of what they could walk off with. The eyes of the man who'd just frisked Hoberg were even now darting around the room, looking for something valuable enough to steal. Just as Billy Elkins, fresh out of jail, had stolen. . . .

Ben grunted. He said, "I got twelve bucks. Might as well tell you. You'll find it anyway, when you tie me up."

THE one who'd killed Hoberg said, "Hold that gun on him, Dutch. I'll take his dough." He moved sidewise around Ben, and Ben caught the glint in his eye and knew that they weren't going to tie him up. That this was a stall.

They didn't want to shoot off a gun and raise a ruckus, and this guy—if the other was Dutch, this must be Benny, his namesake—was making an excuse to get behind him and kill him the same way he'd killed Hoberg.

And there wouldn't be room to try the trick he'd worked on Murro. Benny wouldn't stand that close to hit him, and Dutch was off to one side anyway, with Hoberg's thirty-two aimed at Ben Hayden's belt buckle.

Ben said, "Wait a minute, Benny. Listen, I got an idea."

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"Yeah? What?"

The odd thing was that he *did* have an idea. An idea that had come to him while he'd watched Dutch's eyes wander around the room looking for something to swipe. A long-shot idea, or was it? It started out that Billy Elkins was a dip, maybe even a kleptomaniac type of dip. And it went on that Billy'd stick a shiv—according to Hoberg—into anyone who looked cross-eyed at Mitzie Elkins.

"Five hundred dollars or five thousand dollars—whatever the guy's got on him or can raise quick. How'd you like to have that much money for your getaway? Within a matter of minutes from now?"

"From who?"

Ben said, "From the man who dropped Billy Elkins down the air-shaft."

"Nuts," said the one called Benny. "The copper's just trying to talk his way out of a jam. He's stalling. Go ahead and—"

Dutch said, "Shut up. The guy's talking money. Just maybe he's got something. All right, copper, speak your piece. How would we get this five grand?"

Ben said, "The man who killed Elkins pays you. The three of us go down there. I'm not heeled, and you both are, so you needn't worry about a break. I convince Durban—yeah, Paul Durban killed Elkins—that I can prove a murder rap on him. Then you talk business with him."

"You think he'd pay us—"

"Sure. Take him for whatever dough he's got, for which you agree to save his neck by taking me for a ride. That gives you money to pull your freight on. Then you let me out on a deserted road somewhere and keep traveling. You've got to stage a getaway, don't you. And with real money, you can do it."

"It's risky, but— Listen, copper, if you double-cross us, there ain't a chance it'll do you any good. If anything goes wrong, we shoot *you* first.

We got nothing to lose; we already—" He nodded toward what was left of Frank Hoberg.

"Sure," said Big Ben. "Let's get going."

"We better use the stairs," Dutch said. "Okay, copper, we don't have to trust you. This heater'll be in your back all the way. Go ahead."

The stairway was only a few steps from the door of 7-A. They saw no one in the hallway, nor in the hallway of the fifth floor.

BEN HAYDEN knocked on Durban's door. When it opened, the three of them pushed their way past Durban into the apartment. Dutch closed the door and leaned against it.

Ben said, "Paul, here are a couple of boys who want to talk business with you—after I get through."

Durban looked puzzled, and annoyed. He said, "After you get through what?"

"Talking," said Ben. "I'm starting now. I know why you killed Elkins and how to prove it. You were playing around with Mitzie. You gave her the cigarette girl job at your club, until you talked her into giving it up and letting you install her at a hotel. Then when Billy got out of jail today, you knew he'd find out sooner or later, even though Mitzie had gone into hiding this morning, before he got out. And you knew Billy would kill you when he found out."

"I told you, Hayden, I hadn't seen Mitzie for—"

"Nuts. All we have to do is take you around to the Indiana Hotel for identification by employes or other guests there. If I'm right, it'll be easy to prove it.

"But here's what happened tonight! Billy hadn't found out yet. He was still looking for Mitzie, and he wanted to see you to make a touch. He tried the club, and then came here. You *did* answer the bell, and let him come up. Then, the way I figure it, he must have been in here alone for a short while.

Dunno how that happened, but I'll make one guess.

"You wanted something to kill him with that wouldn't make a noise or a mark. So you went in the bathroom awhile, and you put a cake of soap in the toe of a sock. That makes a good blackjack. Then you came back and—

"Well, you could have killed him here, but you'd have had to carry him to the flat above. My guess is you got him up there on some pretext and slugged him there. Then you rigged the sheets out of the window and dropped him down the airshaft."

Paul Durban didn't smile; there wasn't any expression on his face at all. He said, "That's guesswork, Hayden. Now get the hell out of—"

"Shut up," said Dutch.

"You forgot something, Paul. When you left Elkins in here, you forgot he was a petty dip, maybe a klepto to boot. You say he was never in here. Well, there's proof that he was. Pockets full of it. Elkins' pockets were full of stuff he swiped when you left him alone.

"He stepped into the kitchenette—there's silverware to prove it. And your bureau's just inside the bedroom door and he had time to reach through and loot it—the top of it anyway. Studs and cuff links and stuff. And a gold watch. There was an initial G on it, and that didn't hit me right away.

"But didn't you originally have a name like—wasn't it Golemononavian or something like that? And didn't you change it for business reasons when you opened a club of your own? If we can prove that watch was yours, let alone the rest of the stuff he'd swiped—well, you see where it puts you, since you're on record he didn't come here."

Dutch had stepped forward alongside Ben Hayden while he was talking. His gun was still aimed at Ben; the other man's gun still covered Durban.

Ben said, "Okay, boys. It's your turn. I think he'll talk business."

Dutch's greedy eyes as well as those of the other gunman, swung to Durban's face.



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Ben's big hand lashed out and down at the gun in Dutch's hand, not trying to grab it, but slapping the gun and the hand that held it—with pile-driver force. The gun hit the hardwood floor.

The other gunman was swinging Hoberg's thirty-two around from Durban to Ben, and pulling the trigger. It went off a fraction of a second too soon, just before the muzzle had completed its arc. And he didn't have time to trigger it again, for Big Ben's fist exploded in his face.

Ben changed the blow to a grab, and when he wheeled back around, his hands were full of unconscious gunman. Dutch, his face gray with pain and his right arm hanging as though the wrist were broken, was stooping to pick up the fallen gun with his left hand.

Ben threw his gunman namesake, Benny, at Dutch. And then whirled to Durban.

Ben said, "It was a free fight, Paul. We'd have liked to have had you in on it."

Durban tried to smile, but it was a sickly effort. He said, "I'd rather take my chances with a jury, Hayden. You play too damn rough."

Ben grunted. He picked the two pistols off the floor and then walked over to the telephone. . . .

Captain Rogers was scowling. He said, "Dammit, Ben, we send you to check a simple burglary. You find it's murder, and get the killer, and that's all right. But why, on a night like this, d'you got to start so much trouble we get three more stiff? Murro, and Pete, and Hoberg. And three guys in on murder raps instead of one.

"On top of it, one with a broken arm and one with a broken jaw, so we got to handle them careful. And enough material in those papers on Murro to keep us busy a week.

"Anyhow, I commandeered the last free taxicab in town; it's out front. Take it home and get those wet clothes off and go back to sleep. Tomorrow you'll be a hero, but tonight you're in my hair."



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